



From Warhorses to Ploughshares

The Later Tang Reign of Emperor Mingzong

Richard L. Davis

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From Warhorses to Ploughshares

*To fatten warhorses I have to starve my people—
The shame is more than I can bear!*

—Emperor Mingzong

肥戰馬而瘠吾人，
此吾所媿也。

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To My Students

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My companion in life, Chiang Jung-yuan, born like me in the year of the rabbit, has proven indispensable to grounding me in a world away from academia over the past twenty years. It is our differences that brought us together in the past and enlivens our friendship today. Life has thrown more than the usual obstacles our way, but the winds are finally against our backs, our mutual affections now complemented by an even greater respect. Looking forward to spending the next twenty years with you, hopefully not so far apart.

Richard L. Davis

Preface

Several decades ago, when I entered the profession, pre-modern China historians tended to study individual dynasties as self-contained entities with their own distinct institutions and identities. They focused on the major dynasties like Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279), while ignoring transitional periods like the Five Dynasties (907–979). More recently, however, interest has shifted to periods of transition as the culmination of what preceded it and the foundation for what followed. My own books on the Five Dynasties, a historical translation and an imperial biography, confirm the positive changes that accompanied a period commonly denigrated as a chaotic turn backward. In my biography of Li Cunxu (885–926), the Shatuo monarch posthumously known as Zhuangzong (r. 923–926), I fleshed out the many layers of cooperation between Shatuo rulers and Chinese subjects; I highlighted the ongoing deference for Tang models of governance well into the Five Dynasties period, even as rulers altered past practices to meet contemporary needs. But the genius of Zhuangzong as warrior did not extend to governance and he died in a mutiny of disgruntled soldiers after a brief reign of three years. The work on Zhuangzong represents important background for the current study of Li Siyuan (867–933), better known as Mingzong (r. 926–933). The lengthy treatment of the period of conquest in the previous volume allows me to focus here on the post-conquest era, which is inherently more fascinating, for the second Shatuo emperor evolved into a uniquely able successor. Mutinies rarely produce revolutions, but the policies of Mingzong often proved revolutionary in terms of either political vision or enduring impact.

Without question, Mingzong is the redoubtable icon of Shatuo rule in the tenth century, a period when three Shatuo dynasties ruled the Middle Kingdom in succession in the span of twenty-seven years. He is best remembered for deftly navigating the pull between Chinese and Shatuo traditions to create a “middle path” for his dynasty. Unlike his highly Sinicized predecessor, the marginally literate Emperor Mingzong consciously chose cultural autonomy for himself and his sons in their private lives, even as he developed a political record of close collaboration with civil and military advisors, the Chinese majority and other ethnic minorities. In terms of border policy, he steered clear of far-off missions and resorted to military interventions only in defense

of dynastic interests, in contrast with the grand expansionary policies of his idol Tang Taizong or even his own predecessor, Zhuangzong. Emperor Mingzong refused to pour more treasure into lost causes that ran the risk of entrenched warfare, so he tended to pull the plug on military actions when conditions on the ground dictated, sacrificing imperial face in the service of *realpolitik*. In terms of domestic policy, he balanced carrot and stick, meting out death sentences for corruption or immorality, while bestowing imperial citations upon honest officials: he succeeded in balancing Confucian positivism against the political and military discipline demanded by the times. A highly effective manager, he economized on expenditures, while channeling revenues to the public treasury, not his personal privy in the fashion of his predecessor. In less than eight years, he ushered in an era dubbed the “Small Repose,” a time of rare bounty and stability by the standards of the day. This celebrated legacy was partly a function of Mingzong’s personal qualities and partly a function of the eminently able men who governed on his behalf and women who counseled him at home, including at one point a mere maid.

Throughout the long history of China, second emperors often proved more critical to the legitimacy and the longevity of a regime than the better-known dynastic founders. They consolidated territorial gains and pacified recalcitrant foes, they set a positive political tone at court and created enduring institutions, and more importantly, they often salvaged their regimes from the egotistical excesses of founding fathers. Taizong of the Tang (r. 626–649), Yongle of the Ming (r. 1402–1424), and Kangxi of the Qing (r. 1661–1722) are illustrious examples of this phenomenon. For the twentieth century, the same might be said of Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) in the People’s Republic and Chiang Ching-kuo (1910–1988) in Taiwan. Emperor Mingzong played a similar role as a moderating influence in the Later Tang, the Yongle of the Five Dynasties. His predecessor had unwittingly deployed eunuchs and actors as extensions of his personal power to the detriment of the bureaucratic mainstay, he alienated powerful military machines with frequent rotations and campaigns far afield, and he separated Shatuo warriors from their homes in northern Shanxi by relocating the capital to Luoyang. Mingzong would reverse the worst practices of his predecessor. He governed in the spirit of Confucian benevolence, but benevolence interlaced with a healthy respect for the rule of law. The Shatuo dynasties that followed his own, the Later Jin and Later Han, regimes founded by military strongmen like himself, eventually came to ruin due to the reckless deeds of inept successors. The fraternal succession that elevated Mingzong to power, a practice rooted in Inner Asia, proved more suited to conditions in North China under the Five Dynasties, where unruly regional governors and predatory neighbors lay in constant wait to turn any vacuum in the Middle Kingdom to their advantage. The times demanded an experienced ruler and Mingzong was no disappointment.

Sometime before the twelfth century, the Shatuo disappeared as a distinct ethnic group, or at least the sources no longer identify them as autonomous. One historian attributes this development to a succession of natural disasters in their homeland, while others point to their assimilation into the Han Chinese majority.¹ The extinction of nomadic neighbors is hardly exceptional in the long history of China, but the Shatuo experience seems to have evolved in its own unique way, which makes this little studied period and poorly understood people highly relevant to the macro-history of China. It took just over a century for them to rise from obscurity to the pinnacle of political power in China, only to fall back to obscurity once again a century later. The dramatic twists were partly tied to their spectacular feats, especially as empire-builders, which made them a popular target for rivals. The changing fortunes also relate to critical decisions made in their formative period, especially with regard to choice of residence. They moved at least three times from the eighth to the tenth centuries, initially from the Yin Mountains of Ningxia and Shaanxi to the northern part of Shanxi under the auspices of the Tang government. After laying claim to North China in 923, they moved again from Taiyuan to Luoyang, from north of the Yellow River to the south. This allowed the country's leadership to become more in touch with conditions in China's heartland, but the shift also allowed the Shatuo elite to become acculturated in China at the expense of their own customs and traditions, eventually becoming indistinguishable from the people around them. They seem in great measure to have adapted too well.

I initially drafted a considerably more detailed work, which will be published in Chinese in coming years. For practical reasons, however, I had to produce a more focused treatment for the English version. The original discusses at greater length the military figures and policies of the reign, whereas the English version is focused on Mingzong's political legacy and relations with civilian courtiers. The original provided a broader treatment of border affairs, whereas this volume is focused on Later Tang relations with its premier foe, the Kitan, and the two regions to the south against which the administration waged war, Nanping and Shu. This biography was designed to serve as a companion volume to my translation, *Historical Records of the Five Dynasties*, published a decade ago, so I have followed Ouyang Xiu's nomenclature in terms of the names of people and places. But admittedly Ouyang Xiu was far from a dispassionate voice and I have drawn upon a much wider body of primary materials to reconstruct the reign. I have also adopted the Chinese practice of abbreviating names by citing the individual's personal name, thus Feng Dao is abbreviated as simply Dao, allowing the reader to more easily relate the narrative here to the translation.

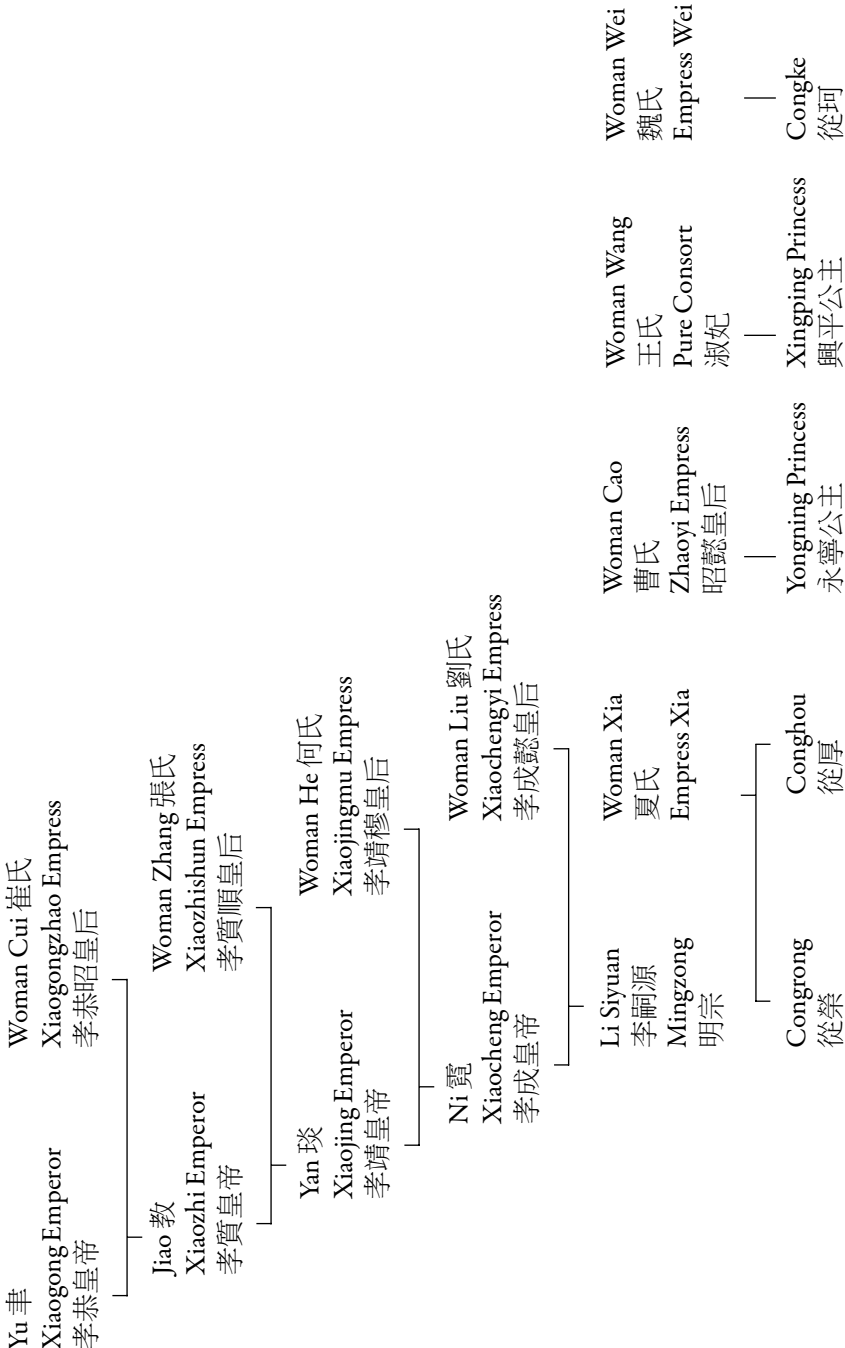
Dates follow Chinese convention: year/month/day.

1. Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, p. 143; Fu Lecheng, "Shatuo zhi Hanhua," pp. 319–38.





Chart 1 Ancestry of Li Siyuan



Chapter 1

People and Places

The Icon

Among the fifty-five potentates of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms era, few were as lionized in life and mourned in death as Li Siyuan (867–933), better known as the “Enlightened Ancestor,” Mingzong. He acceded to the throne illicitly in 926 through military coup, but by dint of concrete deeds, he came to be embraced not just by skeptical courtiers in his day, but more importantly, discriminating historians centuries later. Writing 150 years after his death, Sima Guang (1019–1086), renders this rather generous tribute in the *Comprehensive Mirror for the Advancement of Governance*:

The monarch was instinctively inclined neither to paranoia nor acquisitiveness [like his predecessor]. Presiding over successive years of grain surpluses, he rarely deployed the country’s armed forces. In the context of the Five Dynasties, his reign roughly approximates a Small Repose.

A similar tone of approbation appears in the *Historical Records of the Five Dynasties*, where the cultural chauvinist Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072), an early contemporary of Sima Guang, is forced to concede: “My elders say that Mingzong was genuinely noble in character and magnanimous in love for the people and rightly deserves recognition by the standards of Five Dynasties’ rulers.”¹ Mingzong’s high standing among historians is a reflection of aspirations to preside over the most responsible government in his day—a regime of reasonable taxes, modest expenditures, minimal corruption, and vigilant oversight—a profoundly astute agenda for a man never born to rule.²

A descendant of the Shatuo Turks, Emperor Mingzong came to personify inter-racial harmony that transcends borders, as reflected in the mission, in his own words, “to serve as a unifying force between the Chinese and the barbarians” (*tong hua yi*).³ Shatuo rule over the Middle Kingdom, which at the time included the entirety of North China and much of Sichuan, had begun a few years earlier and responsibility for its continuation rested very substantially upon him, and especially upon his ability

1. ZZTJ 278.9095; XWDS 6.60. For the key to the abbreviation of titles, see the “Sources Cited” section.

2. Zeng, “Lüelun Wudai Houtang,” p. 3.

3. CFYG 65.694.

to bring disparate communities together. Serving as a bridge between peoples was no easy task, as the “barbarians” were hardly a homogenous group, while China was bedeviled by its own forces of fissure, the familiar duo of class and region. He needed to encourage these various groups to downplay their own interests in the service of a higher ideal, to set aside short-term benefit for long-term gain. Equally critical to Mingzong’s historical repute was his effectiveness at creating an inner circle composed of pugnacious advisors and companions, men and women who fueled his ambitions and moderated his excesses. This book is a political biography of Mingzong, but it gives due attention to the larger community of civil and military officials, plus spouses, offspring, and extended family, who left an indelible imprint on the reign. Despite his many gifts, Mingzong was not without defects, but for most of his reign he managed to marshal the strengths of his inner circle to limit the potential damage caused by his own inexperience.

Although owing his throne to the military, Mingzong expressed a deep and lasting sense of responsibility to subjects, regardless of vocation or social station, his words resonating like those of a modern politician:

At each meal, I cannot but reflect upon the hunger of our troops; at each dressing, I cannot but ponder the common people’s exposure to the cold . . . I regard esteemed leaders across the Four Corners as my loyal subjects and the people in the myriad of districts as my beloved children.⁴

In this simple statement emerges a model for inclusive government. From the mightiest governors in the cities to the poorest of rural peasants, they were all his “beloved children.”

Emperor Mingzong could rival the illustrious Taizong of early Tang in charity and frugality, charisma and discipline, but the Tang survived for nearly three centuries after Taizong’s passing, whereas the line of Mingzong would be extinguished in merely two years—a seemingly undeserved fate. The culprit was partly serendipity, his seven and a half year reign cut short by death in his mid-sixties. Mingzong also suffered the misfortune of intrigue over the succession among several potential heirs, conflict that proved personally demoralizing in the final days of his life and politically destabilizing in death. It was an appalling end for the first Shatuo house to rule China under the Five Dynasties, but also a personal tragedy for the otherwise exacting monarch, whose greatest fault was a soft spot for family. The two Shatuo regimes to follow his own dynasty, the Later Jin and Later Han, were bereft of visionary leaders like Mingzong and governed for progressively shorter spells. The peak of Shatuo power thus coincided with the reign of Emperor Mingzong and the highest potential for his people as caretakers of the Middle Kingdom is reflected in his times. Precisely because the Shatuo later disappeared as a people, the recovery of their history is something of a sacred enterprise. For them, the historical record is all that remains.

4. CFYG 65.694.

The Five Dynasties of North China lasted only fifty-three years, while Mingzong's reign, shy of eight years, represents a mere slice of the whole. Why does this particular person merit our attention? Just as the tenth century had witnessed the gradual resurgence of civilian power, law and order, after the prolonged dominance of military men, the era of Mingzong provides evidence in microcosm of the trend toward civilian rule at an important turning point. Despite the importance of the Later Tang to this and many other developments, not a single book-length study has been written on the period in general or the reign in particular. In addition, the Five Dynasties was a time of intense competition for material and human resources, the most viable regimes prospering by raiding lesser regimes of talent. The high quality of personnel at the Later Tang court at its peak was a reflection of aggressive recruitment across the lines of class and culture, ethnicity and region. In effect, Mingzong had an impressive strategy for recruiting human talent. Moreover, the Five Dynasties was a time of fluid territorial borders and ethnic boundaries, as Inner Asians collaborated with Han peoples, the period witnessing levels of cross-cultural negotiation that mirrors the Tang at its peak in the seventh century, albeit on a smaller scale. Adopting the dynasty's name and residing in its palaces, Shatuo emperors were zealous in their embrace and preservation of Tang civilization. At the same time, we witness the negotiation of Chinese monarchy by the Shatuo on their own terms, weaving nomadic cultural and religious practices into the fabric of imperial life. Concerns about cultural autonomy and conflicts over its implementation as policy would powerfully inform Shatuo history at this critical juncture. They had become the ultimate political insiders, but the founding rulers never forgot their separateness as a people.

Historians have long dismissed the Five Dynasties as a time of endemic chaos and misrule, which may apply to some intervals, but scarcely the entire period. Overall, the south, home of nine of the Ten Kingdoms, fared noticeably better than the north; military conflict tended to be more sporadic, especially for the largest satrapies in the region: Wu, Shu, and Southern Han. The average southern state lasted over four decades, compared to a single decade for dynasties in the north. The five governments of North China, which followed one another in quick succession, were inherently less stable at the apex of power in the capital, although to a lesser extent along the periphery. The north also suffered from the dual threats of menacing neighbors along its expansive borders and a plethora of domestic enemies.

By any measure, the Later Tang under Mingzong was the exceptional bright spot in terms of containing domestic and foreign conflicts, while advancing a constructive agenda for governance. The dynasty presided over 170 prefectures, including 46 acquired after the conquest of Sichuan in 925, to create the largest area of any empire in its day (see Map 1).⁵ The monarch's predecessor, Zhuangzong, had toiled for more than a decade in laying the dynasty's territorial foundation, only to perish three years

5. Mostern, "The Usurper's Empty Names," pp. 136–40.

later as his armies campaigned against Sichuan, an area that eventually proved easier to gain than to govern. In retrospect, Zhuangzong seems to have overextended the natural limits of an empire rooted in the regions north of the Yellow River. In contrast, Mingzong placed greater stock in preserving the status quo.⁶ His modest ambitions with reference to empire had a downside: the beginning of a process whereby the newly acquired lands in the southwest would be ceded to local powerbrokers by his successor, while to the north the Kitan, a lesser power relative to the Shatuo in the 920s, were allowed to strengthen their hand north of the Great Wall and position themselves to reap the spoils of instability in the Chinese heartland decades later. Even the smallest of tributary states, Nanping, created its fair share of headaches. Thus, the virtues associated with the reign were precisely the factors that detracted from Mingzong's historical legacy over the long haul, impulses that led him to compromise with his enemies, rather than fight for principle.

Dramatic divergences in the competence and the character of the emperor's offspring also proved determinative of the dynasty's fate. Mingzong suffered the misfortune of virtually every great ruler in history: his progeny compared unfavorably to him.⁷ Having lost his most promising sons before his accession, he concentrated on his oldest survivor, Li Congrong (d. 933), a youth proud of his command of the Chinese language.⁸ Sometime around 932, Congrong acknowledged, "During leisure, I like nothing more than reading books and discussing the classics with scholars." But Mingzong, then sixty-six, responded with ambivalence rather than approbation, according to one version of the exchange in the *Historical Records*:

I recall the former emperor's propensity for composing songs and poems, something of little value, it seems to me! . . . As a man advanced in years, the symbolic meaning of the classics eludes me, although I enjoy listening to scholars lecture on the topic from time to time. Study beyond that point is simply not worthwhile!

Elsewhere in the exchange, Mingzong cites his predecessor's obsession with base arts like acting and singing, a recent reminder of the potential for immersion in Chinese ways to distract Shatuo leaders from their martial duties. Without disparaging Chinese ways or discouraging the pursuit of literacy, the emperor pragmatically reminds the son of his family's identity as warriors from Inner Asia. In resisting the natural attraction to Chinese culture, Mingzong sought to set boundaries for his sons, intent on preserving some cultural practices rooted in the steppe. He did not necessarily succeed in changing the predilections of this particular son, but his sentiments helped to set boundaries for his descendants in navigating the world of Han and Hu, guidance that they ignored to their own peril.

6. Zeng, "Lüelun Wudai Houtang," p. 3.

7. WDHY 2.19–20. Another source cites four sons; XWDS 15.161.

8. XWDS 15.163; ZZTJ 278.9077; CFYG 158.1766–67, 270.3067; Fu, "Shatuo zhi Hanhua," p. 331.

Despite his concern with preserving traditions native to his people, Mingzong evolved into a Son of Heaven with a visible presence among his Chinese subjects, as reflected in the frequency of imperial visits to scenic sites in Luoyang, late-night banquets with senior statesmen and family friends, and tours of the countryside to inspect farms and construction sites. Chieftains from Inner Asia commonly functioned more like esteemed peers than sovereigns sanctioned by Heaven, and the extroverted political style of Emperor Mingzong seems to have roots in another culture. His lifestyle preferences would place serious strains on palace managers and security details, but they provided an occasion to break through China's notorious imperial bubble. Unlike his predecessor, whose social and political lives tended to run along separate tracks, Mingzong became a regular presence in Luoyang, a presence which ran through the reign.

Emperor Mingzong also broke the mold of emperors of his day in managing to take leave of the capital for over a year without a single return trip. He had gone to Kaifeng in 927 on suspicion of a potential mutiny by the local governor. Despite the quick success of armies sent to suppress the mutiny, he made the remarkable decision to remain indefinitely. Four years earlier, his predecessor, Zhuangzong, had proposed personal command of armies against Sichuan, only to relent under pressure from officials. Mingzong not only proceeded with the trip to Kaifeng, but he even proposed a second imperial tour farther north to Weizhou. The desire for sojourns away from the capital seems to have waned in later life, due chiefly to the decline in domestic threats to the government. Nonetheless, an important precedent had been set by affording a reigning monarch some freedom of movement, a precedent that might have offered a welcome change for his successors. The experience had another important impact: it convinced Mingzong of the need to provide administrative experience away from the capital for his adult sons, after which they became his window on the world.

The political and social activism of Mingzong emanated from more than the simple urge to be liberated from the trifles of monarchy. It should rightfully be seen as a reaching out to the people of China from a ruler conscious of his identity as an outsider and anxious to shorten the space that separated him from his subjects. For two generations, the Shatuo had brought together various communities in the border region, complemented by a broad swathe of Han Chinese across the north, to consolidate their grip on the northern Yellow River region and conquer the Central Plains. Inner Asians, and especially fellow Shatuo who had figured prominently in the early stages of empire-building, remained visible in the post-conquest era as military advisors and imperial friends. The emperor's public persona served to camouflage the privileged standing of himself and his people. At the same time, Mingzong sought to ameliorate potential frictions within his capital by drawing widely upon the Chinese majority, not simply to manage civilian affairs, where their dominance was inevitable, but to share a larger portion of state resources and perquisites. The racial diversity of the administration in

the absence of artificial barriers between different ethnic groups through housing and marriage arrangements made the experience of the Shatuo unique in the history of minority rule for the past millennium. Thus, the Shatuo under Mingzong appear more protective of their own cultural identity relative to the Wei dynasty ruled by the Tuoba four centuries earlier, yet they ruled by similarly inclusive policies.

The Shatuo People

Mingzong went initially by Miaojiilie, his Shatuo name, shifting to the Chinese name Li Siyuan as a young adult. Born in 867, the ninth day of the ninth month (October 10), Siyuan was the eldest son of a chieftain with the personal name Ni and a mother surnamed Liu, a grandfather called Yan, and a grandmother surnamed He (see Chart 1). The surnames of his mother and grandmother seem to suggest Chinese ancestry on Siyuan's maternal side, but for centuries, Inner Asians residing in China often adopted Liu as surname, so we cannot preclude some nomadic blood for his maternal side. Nonetheless, the distinct features of Inner Asians were clearly visible in his people, based on the sole surviving painting of a Shatuo emperor in the Five Dynasties, Zhuangzong, with his sharp facial features, full beard, and wide gait (see Figure 1).

Siyuan grew up initially at Yingzhou, northern Shanxi, roughly a hundred kilometers south of the Great Wall, when he was orphaned by the death of his father, Ni, at the age of thirteen *sui*.⁹ His father's position as "chieftain" suggests considerable stature within the local warrior elite, which in turn implies exposure to the martial arts since youth. Siyuan had the good fortune to be old enough to be molded in critical ways by his biological parents, but young enough to bond well with a new family.¹⁰ He subsequently came under the protective wing of Li Guochang (d. 887) and Li Keyong (856–908), confederates of his father then based at Jinyang, central Shanxi. The wife of Keyong and the mother of Siyuan shared the surname Liu, although there is no tangible evidence of familial bonds between the two women.

By seventeen *sui*, Siyuan had evolved into a scrappy fighter. Keyong's principal consort was pregnant with the future Zhuangzong when Siyuan arrived in Jinyang, so the youth filled a symbolic paternal void in a man then nearly thirty and without male heir. It was Keyong's father, Guochang, who first marveled at Siyuan's skills as hunter and archer, later bonding with him like his own father.¹¹ Siyuan made every effort to win acceptance in his new home, a better place for an ambitious Shatuo youth to realize his dreams. The subsequent devotion of Siyuan to his adopted community emanates from a strong sense of good fortune for escaping the fate of most teenage

9. In the absence of a concept for zero, the Chinese traditionally started life at one, making age counted in *sui* generally one year older than the West, although sometimes as much as two years, when birthdays came later in the year.

10. JWDS 35.482.

11. JWDS 35.491.

orphans in his day, abandonment or servitude. His modest beginnings help to explain Siyuan's preference for simple surroundings in later life, "his home devoid of valuables," contemporaries say, alluding to an aloofness to material comforts that would last a lifetime.¹² The contrast with the eldest son of Keyong was striking: Li Cunxu saw power and glory as a birthright and tended to be supremely arrogant and self-absorbed. Cunxu and Siyuan may have been raised in the same extended family, but the two men were a lesson in contrasts.



Figure 1
Official portrait of Emperor Zhuangzong, predecessor of Mingzong. Courtesy of the National Palace Museum, Taiwan.

12. *Beimeng suoyan* 18.330.

His people, the Shatuo, “people of the Sandy Steppes,” a name perhaps transliterated from ancient Turkish, were descended from the Turks of Inner Asia, also dubbed the “Türgish” people. They had lived along the nomadic frontier of North China for many centuries, as part of China’s “inner zone.”¹³ Historical references to the Shatuo, however, begin only with the Tang dynasty (618–907). They may have gone by other names or splintered off from other groups like the Chuyue Turks, or they may represent an amalgam of numerous tribes, including the Hu, Tartars, Huihu, and Tuhun.¹⁴ More likely, Shatuo tribes during their pre-historical period were conflated with other groups along the border by indiscriminating contemporaries. Increasingly over the course of the Tang, they became mercenaries of the court as part of an ongoing policy to “pit barbarian against barbarian” as a check on aggression against China itself, the Shatuo evolving as willing agents of Tang policy.

Reflecting the permeability of borders at the time, the Shatuo had once roamed a sizable area in China’s northwest—extending from southern Mongolia into Ningxia and parts of northern Shaanxi—as traders in horses, sheep, and cattle, animals partly consumed by them but mostly traded along their southern frontier.¹⁵ The Tujue Turks had dominated that swathe of porous borderland for much of the seventh and eighth centuries, the Shatuo likely constituting one ethnic community beneath the broad multi-ethnic umbrella of Inner Asian Turks. But the Shatuo evolved quickly into a distinct ethnic group after their move to the south and east. Historians believe that they also knew the language of the Tujue Turks, their own language having most likely derived from it.¹⁶ Sources allude to Mingzong speaking a “barbarian language” (*fanyu*), which might have been his native Shatuo dialect, but more likely represents some variant of Tujue, the lingua franca of the Silk Road in Tang times and earlier.¹⁷

The early Shatuo, “with their reverence for spirits and fondness for divination,” appear to have practiced some aspects of Manichaeism, a religion introduced to China in the period of division preceding Tang rule in the seventh century.¹⁸ The sacrifice of animals upon the death of relatives may have emanated from that religion as well. Shamanism likely left an equally indelible mark on the daily religious practices of the Shatuo through their worship of gods and fear of nature.¹⁹ The notion of a “Heavenly God” (*Tianshen*) also appears to have originated with the Turks of Inner Asia, who

13. *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 6, p. 8; Lewis, *China’s Cosmopolitan Empire*, p. 152; Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, p. 144.

14. Chen Jiahua, *Zhongguo lidai minzu shi*, pp. 132–72, esp. 132; ZZTJ 251.8140; Eberhard, *A History of China*, pp. 199–204.

15. JWDS 91.1200; XWDS ch. 46, p. 514; 51.577; Chen Jiahua, *Zhongguo lidai minzu shi*, pp. 132–36; Fu, “Shatuo zhi Hanhua,” pp. 319–20; Wang Xusong, “Shatuo Hanhua zhi guocheng”; Lewis, *China between Empires*, p. 168.

16. Chen Jianhua, *Zhongguo lidai minzu shi*, p. 168.

17. Fan, “Shatuo de zuyuan ji qi zaoqi lishi.”

18. Lewis, *China between Empires*, p. 158.

19. Chen Jiahua, *Zhongguo lidai minzu shi*, pp. 171–72.

exported their own distinct form of Buddhism to the Shatuo.²⁰ Admittedly, the Chinese also conducted divination to nature, but by the tenth century, better-educated Chinese tended to regard anomalies of nature as predictable, whereas northerners like the Shatuo tended to view nature as dangerously capricious and in need of constant assuagement. Like other Inner Asians, the Shatuo appear to have acquired a high regard for sculpture as craft, an aesthetic imported from the West, as reflected in the popularity of the Longmen Caves and their monumental icons with a succession of rulers, including Mingzong.²¹

Initially dubbed in historical sources as the “Turks of Shatuo prefecture” (*Shatuo Tujue*), occasional references to the “three tribes of Shatuo” suggest the coexistence of multiple confederations, the Shatuo ascent coinciding with the decline of the Eastern Turks in the eighth century.²² Their armies in the ninth century may have been small, but Shatuo warriors seemed uniquely “brave and aggressive,” courage in war buttressed by an enviable expertise in archery and siege warfare. Indeed, the best of their bowmen could deliver enough force to pierce the shield of foes with their arrows.²³ The Shatuo cooperated with the Uighurs, Tibetans, and other ethnic groups in the northwest at intervals in the mid-to-late eighth century, only for alliances to shift toward the Middle Kingdom after the decline of those two powers in the last century of Tang rule.²⁴ The Shatuo autonomy from the steppe evolved incrementally in concert with their expanding military presence south of the Great Wall, a development that took much of a century through a mixture of conflict and cooperation with Changan.²⁵

After 809, with the blessings of the Tang government, a sizable cluster of Shatuo Turks representing several different tribes resettled in the Daibei region in northern Shanxi, their presence extending from the Taiyuan plains northward to Datong. Other clusters appear to have remained to the west and the north, thereby retaining more of their original culture.²⁶ During the Tang, the area went by the name of Hedong, the circuit east of the Yellow River, although “Jin” was a more popular appellation among locals and referenced the region’s ancient name. The arid terrain and sparse vegetation of central Shanxi were ideally suited to the herding and hunting traditions of the immigrants, making for a permanent Shatuo presence. Relocation to the Chinese heartland facilitated regular contact with the government of China, as Tang commanders rallied the pugnacious Inner Asians to repulse insurgents in the empire’s interior starting from the early ninth century, ultimately integrating the Shatuo into a “patrimonial

20. Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, pp. 146–47.

21. Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, p. 147.

22. XTS 218.6153.

23. XWDS 4.33.

24. XTS 218.6154–58.

25. Lewis, *China’s Cosmopolitan Empire*, pp. 5–29.

26. Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, p. 141.

patron-client" relationship, to employ the terminology of one historian, a relationship cynically designed to advance the interests of Changan.²⁷

Augmenting the tactical value of the Shatuo to the government in Changan was a steady growth in numbers. Based on reports of six thousand to seven thousand "tents" during the late eighth century, some scholars estimate the Shatuo population at just over thirty thousand people, including women and children.²⁸ The estimate appears overly conservative: the frequent inclusion of other Inner Asians and Chinese locals in major military actions militates against the isolation of Shatuo numbers, the basis for any estimate of total population. Moreover, the Shatuo realized a stunning surge in population, perhaps even a doubling in numbers from the late ninth to the early tenth centuries, partly by absorbing former mercenaries from the steppe and partly by striking a panoply of multi-ethnic marriages. By then, they had evolved into a group less Turkic in blood and more tied to the land as a semi-sedentary people. The combination of social prominence and strategic clout transformed the Hedong settlers into a pivotal force in the politics of the early tenth century, as an enfeebled Tang monarchy tottered on collapse. And heightened contacts with the Middle Kingdom over time allowed for changes in cultural practices, including the transmission of a written language to a people without their own writing system, nor for that matter a simple surname.

"The northern barbarians have no surnames," writes Ouyang Xiu in the *Historical Records of the Five Dynasties*.²⁹ The claim is surely overstated, as Ouyang Xiu tended to generalize for all northerners the customs of only some. But for the Shatuo Turks specifically, the adoption of surnames came late in their evolution as a people and likely in imitation of Chinese practice. The earliest known ancestor, Shatuo Jinshan, who dates to the late seventh century, clearly went by his personal name.³⁰ Li Siyuan's great-grandfather by adoption, who went by the name Zhuye Jinzhong, employed Zhuye as tribal name, which later writers misconstrued as surname. The grandson of Jinzhong, Zhuye Chixin would elect to abandon his Turkish name once the Tang throne bestowed on him the name Li Guochang in recognition of services rendered.³¹ Guochang had acquired some measure of celebrity decades earlier by leading raids against the Huihu Uighurs.³²

The conferral of the imperial surname and a Chinese-style personal name, usually accompanied by registry as Tang subject, constituted the highest form of patronage for meritorious service to the government in Changan, which employed the practice

27. Lewis, *China between Empires*, p. 146.

28. JTS 196.5257; Fan, "Shatuo de zuyuan ji qi zaoqi lishi," p. 77. Wolfram Eberhard's estimate of 100,000 Shatuo men at the peak of their power is clearly off the mark; see *A History of China*, p. 200; *Conquerors and Rulers*, p. 142.

29. XWDS 4.39.

30. Chen Jiahua, *Zhongguo lidai minzu shi*, p. 132; Fan, "Shatuo de zuyuan ji qi zaoqi lishi," pp. 71–73.

31. *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 3, pp. 759, 786; JTS 19.674; XTS 218.6156–58.

32. ZZTJ 246.7942.

widely. Yet an action borne of strategic need had acquired an added layer of cultural meaning as Shatuo leaders became a symbolic extension of the ruling family and assumed its titles and offices. Such patent manipulation by the Son of Heaven met with surprisingly little resistance from many nomadic groups along the border, including Li Guochang and his eldest son, Li Keyong, who assumed a Chinese-style name in his mid-teens and employed it so exclusively that his original Shatuo name is forever lost to history. Keyong's adopted son Siyuan was similarly adamant about using his Chinese name and once killed a man in a fit of fury for blurting out his Shatuo name, Miaojiilie, even though Siyuan was a mere soldier at the time.³³ For generations, the Shatuo took immense pride in their fictional relationship with the Tang monarchy as embodied in a shared surname. But the embrace of Chinese names and titles does not necessarily imply spineless subservience to the Middle Kingdom, as the word "patrimony" implies. The beauty of the Tang model of border management is that it entailed infinitely more carrot than stick, more benevolent bounty than coercive pressure. Moreover, in the absence of names in their indigenous language, the Shatuo would need to develop other ways to define community.

The Life and Legacy of Li Keyong

Despite the eagerness of the Shatuo to serve, and perhaps due to misplaced zeal, their collaboration with the Tang evolved unevenly, as parochial suspicions sometimes erupted into armed conflict. Li Guochang seemed "too aggressive and arbitrary in seeking validation from the Tang throne," from the perspective of Changan, taking an assortment of initiatives in the 870s that caused the court to consign him to the empire's northern fringe.³⁴ The Shatuo Turks even briefly retreated farther north to the "Tartar" regions of Mongolia in 880, following a string of setbacks inflicted by Changan. Yet a fresh wave of rebel activity a year later led by Huang Chao (d. 884), arguably the gravest peril to Tang rule in over a century, gave the Shatuo another chance to wrap themselves in the flag of dynasty and restore their reputation as credible mercenaries: they figured prominently in expelling insurgents from the capital in 883, forcing Huang Chao to retreat as splinter groups disintegrated. Soon thereafter, Guochang was succeeded by his son Li Keyong, then twenty-eight *sui*. Keyong wisely enlisted Tartar mercenaries along with fellow Turks in the final assault on the remnants of other rebel groups in China's northwest, which ended fruitfully within a year. Without the support of Shatuo mercenary armies, the Huang Chao rebellion might have proceeded for some years and wreaked considerably more havoc. The Tang court rewarded Keyong with an assignment as prefect of Daizhou, in northern Shanxi, an

33. XWDS 32.350.

34. XWDS 4.31.

area already containing clusters of Shatuo settlers.³⁵ The city was scarcely a hundred kilometers north of Yingzhou, the ancestral home of Siyuan.

Keyong's mother, Woman Qin, was likely Chinese by birth, but the ways of her son were solidly rooted in the steppe. Early on, he won acclaim as an archer capable of "hitting twin flying ducks from a reclining position," heroic escapades that inspired the sobriquet "Dragon with a Single Eye" (*Du yan long*).³⁶ As a teenager, if not sooner, Keyong had joined his father in battle to evolve as a superior warrior and strategist.³⁷ It was doubtless during the combat of youth that Keyong lost the eye that inspired his nickname, although diminished eyesight had little effect on his agility as archer or his deftness at sizing up the opponent. Keyong succeeded Guochang in 883 with little known opposition, a sign that the practice of father-to-son succession had already been introduced to the Shatuo as early as the eighth century, the times of Jinshan, despite the preference for fraternal succession among many other nomadic communities at the time.³⁸

The stewardship of Keyong over the Shatuo for the next quarter century proved beleaguered beyond belief for a man of his many gifts. Partly by intent and partly inertia, he became embedded in the Chinese world after securing Tang investiture as the Prince of Jin, a title passed on to his son. Still, relations with the south soured during Keyong's initial decade of power: Changan's enfeebled monarchs were often compelled by circumstance to slight the council of the Shatuo prince on domestic affairs while coddling rival governors like Zhu Wen, Keyong's arch rival. The court once even sanctioned military action against the Jin.³⁹ Meanwhile, the Shatuo took frequent recourse to plunder, sometimes for the sake of self-preservation, but often in a frustrated cry for validation, as in the sacking of the Chinese capital in 885. Only later did the alliance stabilize, Keyong proving more committed to the dynasty's survival than the bulk of the Chinese governors in his day.⁴⁰ In the process, the Shatuo came to be perceived by other Inner Asians as fundamentally "southern" in orientation, their future increasingly tied to China and divorced from the steppe.⁴¹

For much of the ninth century, the Jin satrapy's base of operations had centered on Jinyang, in the heart of Hedong circuit. The site held historic import as the base of operations for the Tuoba (Tabgach), Inner Asian founders of the Northern Wei dynasty in the early fifth century. Generations later, Jinyang served as the summer

35. Chen Jiahua, *Zhongguo lidai minzu shi*, pp. 142–43.

36. XWDS 4.32; JWDS 25.332.

37. JTS 19.681.

38. XTS 218.6154. Sources vary on the date of Guochang's death: the *Old History of the Five Dynasties* gives 883, while the *New History of the Tang* gives 887. On the discrepancy among various sources, see annotation in JWDS 25.332.

39. XWDS 4.32–38.

40. ZZTJ 260.8481.

41. Standen, *Unbounded Loyalty*, p. 32.

resort for Sui emperors. It was also the location from which the founders of the Tang unleashed their armies against the Sui capital of Changan. The Tang subsequently elevated Jinyang to the status of “northern capital,” even though its rulers never governed from its precincts. The Tang royal family also married women from the city’s illustrious families, including Gaozong, whose first spouse, Woman Wang, hailed from the area, like the father of her successor, the infamous Wu Zetian.⁴² The ruling family of the Sui had similarly intermarried with the Jinyang elite and assigned a succession of imperial sons to the area, such as the dynasty’s second monarch, Yangdi.⁴³ Jinyang’s repute as the land of kings and queens would peak in the Five Dynasties era, when founders of three of the five houses to unify the north emanated from bases there—the Later Tang, Jin, and Han. The city was also seat of the scrappy Northern Han, the last of the Ten Kingdoms to defy the Song mandate, carrying its resistance until 979.

Li Keyong possessed a deeply ingrained sense of duty, fidelity, and honor, values rooted in the warrior traditions of Yinshan, where his formative years were spent, and which he brought to his new home in Hedong. It is noteworthy that these were precisely the character traits associated with Li Siyuan, Keyong’s adopted son. Family and friends remembered Keyong’s endearing personal qualities, but associates, especially subordinate officers, often saw a severe side as pertains to martial discipline. For example, Keyong frequently applied the full force of the law for the infractions of lieutenants, including castration for some crimes.⁴⁴ He also possessed a testy temper and stinging tongue. He once cursed and flogged a younger brother for the offence of “undue parsimony in provisioning troops.” The physical injury of flogging, worsened by the withering censure, so mortified the sibling that he died suddenly.⁴⁵ Stories of this sort demonstrate that Keyong kept surrogates on a tight leash, including his own relatives. To the extent that kinsmen were not above censure, Keyong’s sense of fairness seemed to compensate for the authoritarian streak. It was precisely this combination of strength and sentimentality that made Keyong the symbolic father and role model for two rulers in the Later Tang, Zhuangzong and Mingzong, although admittedly the former never inherited his father’s personal discipline, while the latter lacked his even-handedness in husbanding family and friends.

At the center of Li Keyong’s inner circle were two women, Woman Liu (d. 925), his legal spouse, and Consort Cao (d. 925), mother of four sons. Based on their surnames, the two women were likely of Chinese ancestry. The surname Cao had been adopted by numerous ethnic groups at the time, according to the Tang dynastic history, while northern Shanxi had a long history of cross-cultural intermarriage.⁴⁶ Sources are silent on the family roots of Woman Liu, although a Liu clan of Jinyang did enjoy some

42. *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 3, pp. 153, 156, 201, 243, 245.

43. Yuan, *Sui Yangdi zhuan*, pp. 43–44, 62–63, 157.

44. JWDS 55.745, 91.1207; XWDS 14.142.

45. XWDS 14.148.

46. XWDS ch. 14, p. 141–42; HR pp. 130–32; XTS 212B.6243–45; Deng, “Lun Wudai Songchu.”

prominence in Tang times, making for the possibility of a connection.⁴⁷ And indeed, the confidence of an upper-class woman seems to be borne out by her multiplicity of talents. A frequent companion of Keyong during the kingdom's early conflicts, Woman Liu advised him on assorted military and political matters in the assertive fashion of women from Inner Asia such as the wife of Kitan ruler Abaoji, the Lady Shulü, a younger contemporary.⁴⁸ Woman Liu even coached women in the royal household in archery and horseback riding, activities that harken back to the Tang, where a daughter of the dynasty's founder commanded men in the field.⁴⁹ Royal women had a long and venerable history of serving in support missions of the sort, in China proper as well as Inner Asia.

By his early thirties, in the absence a son by his legal wife, Keyong bonded with Consort Cao, mother of his eldest surviving son.⁵⁰ The consort came to counsel Keyong on matters of personal and political conduct, much like his formal wife, her "soberly worded admonitions" sparing the lives of many associates who crossed the satrap during moments of foul temper.⁵¹ She was the biological mother of Zhuangzong, whose filial devotion to her was legendary. In life, Consort Cao, a strict disciplinarian, had been a positive force in the life of her imperfect son, but her death in the summer of 925 would produce such paranoia as to unravel the reign in less than a year. She had been elevated to empress upon Zhuangzong's accession as emperor in 923, forcing Woman Liu's relegation to consort in later life. Woman Liu and Consort Cao, the leading women in Keyong's life, were wedded emotionally through their love and respect for him, sharing the sort of eternal bond rarely found between first wives and favored consorts. The amicable relations within Keyong's household provided a model for his sons, especially Siyuan, whose biological mother was surnamed Liu and future empress surnamed Cao.

Keyong had another consort in the person of Lady Chen. Native to the city of Xiangzhou in south central China (modern Xiangyang, Henan), she was once a ranking consort of the Tang emperor Zhaozong, who gave her to Keyong in 895, along with four female musical performers from his palace, in a special act of favor.⁵² She is heralded as a rare beauty with a special knack for calligraphy, qualities that enhanced her appeal. Consort Chen and Keyong came to share such strong ties that she was the only consort allowed to visit him during a bout of depression brought on by a sudden dip in military fortunes. She apparently had no children, certainly no male children, for the consort left the Jinyang royal household upon Keyong's death in 908 to join a Buddhist nunnery, fulfilling a promise of long standing to him. She would resur-

47. *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 3, p. 243.

48. Mote, *Imperial China*, p. 50; *Liao shi*, 71.1199–1200.

49. Zhao, *Tang Taizong zhuan*, p. 24; XTS 83.3642–43.

50. XWDS 14.150–51; HR pp. 140–41.

51. XWDS 14.142; HR p. 131.

52. JWDS 49.673–74; ZZTJ 260.8476.

face during Mingzong's reign in her new role as spiritual leader, a sign of her genuine devotion to the religion in the manner of other women within the Shatuo royal family.

The several leading women in Keyong's life, surviving him by nearly seventeen years, never lost their affection for him nor their affinity for one another—a phenomenon rare for any period. However powerful his passion for feminine beauty, one diminished only slightly by the advance of years, Keyong clearly possessed exceptional character traits that compensated for his roving eye.⁵³ By all indications, each woman offered a different kind of companionship at different stages in his life, the three as dissimilar from one another as they differed from him. The histories portray neither Woman Liu nor Consort Cao as especially attractive, a sign that Keyong placed other factors before beauty in the selection of consorts, factors ranging from command of the martial arts to competence in household affairs. Modern social historians have noted the strength of “mother-to-son bonding” among families from Inner Asia, in contrast with China's traditional stress on the “father-to-son” relationship.⁵⁴ These observations appear borne out by the experience of the Shatuo ruling family in Keyong's day, where mothers were often a leading source of parental discipline, while sons tended to be filial to mothers to a fault. This forced fathers into the role of nurturers, even spoilers of their sons.

Imperial Women

Inasmuch as Mingzong was an accidental emperor, the particulars about his married life in youth and the maternity of his children are scant and sometimes contested. We can confirm that he fathered at least six sons, although a larger number apparently died too young to receive formal names and investitures. The eldest son perished in 926 on the heels of the mutiny that swept him to power, a second son in 933 mere days before his own death, and at least one son earlier in life, leaving one adult male and several young boys as survivors. In addition, Mingzong fathered sixteen daughters, three of whom outlived him.⁵⁵ His progeny represents the offspring of several consorts before the accession and a harem of roughly twenty women afterwards. The modest size of his family made each child, male and female, a rare asset in striking strategic marriages.

The woman elevated posthumously by Mingzong as empress in the seventh year of his reign, Woman Xia, produced two sons destined to figure prominently in dynastic politics, Congrong, the son who nearly succeeded his father, and Conghou (914–934), the son who did succeed him as Emperor Min.⁵⁶ Extant sources are silent about the history of her relationship with the future monarch, including whether they were ever married in life. Upon her investiture as empress in 932, Woman Xia was cel-

53. *Xu Tang shu*, 35.288.

54. Lewis, *China between Empires*, p. 190; XWDS 14.141–43.

55. WDHY 2.20; 2.22.

56. JWDS 49.676; XWDS 15.157; WDHY 1.13.

ebred for “her noble character and lifelong commitment to family,” which obviously papered over deficiencies in pedigree.⁵⁷ The dynastic history reports an infraction in the household of Siyuan that caused him to beat her with a stick, the sort of corporal punishment common for servants, but unacceptably harsh for women of standing in the household such as wives and consorts. Once a fortune-teller predicted her future fate as imperial mother, Siyuan began to treat Woman Xia more generously, but the change came in the last years of her life, by all indications.⁵⁸ A background as household servant would have precluded her marriage to Siyuan as legal wife. In life, she was likely never more than a lesser consort, a fact confirmed by the fact that her investiture as empress was deferred until the end of the reign as a consequence of the advancement of her sons as royal princes. Sources do not reveal the identity of Siyuan’s wife or wives in early life, so his first spouse may well have died young without issue, causing him to turn to consorts for companionship in his middle years, years largely spent on assignment away from home.

For the last three years of Mingzong’s reign, the self-effacing Woman Cao (d. 936) presided over the Middle Palace as empress.⁵⁹ She is the only identifiable legal wife. Sources say little about her background, although the mother of Zhuangzong, Mingzong’s predecessor, shared the same surname and hailed from a prominent Jinyang family, so the women were likely related in some way. As governor, the future Mingzong petitioned to come to the capital upon learning of Dowager Cao’s passing in 925, signaling close personal ties to the deceased empress. Elevated to senior consort in 928 and empress in 930, Woman Cao, like Woman Xia, appears to have enjoyed no exceptional favor at the outset, as reflected in the four-year delay in formalizing her standing.⁶⁰ By her own admission, Empress Cao suffered from poor health, which contributed to a general disinterest in the ceremonial side of her position, such as outings in the capital or state banquets. The empress produced no sons by all indications, although she did give birth to the emperor’s eldest daughter, the Yongning Princess, who married the celebrated Shatuo warrior Shi Jingtang (892–942). Sources say that Consort Cao once favored Consort Wang’s installation as empress, a favorite of Mingzong for much of his life, but the Consort deferred to Empress Cao out of mutual esteem. The empress was also on intimate terms with Li Congke (885–937), the emperor’s favorite adopted son, which certainly contributed in some measure to his success in navigating the perilous waters of Five Dynasties politics.

Over the course of the reign, Mingzong’s two leading consorts evolved into key allies within the palace, Consort Wang deferring to the authority of Empress Cao while the empress protected the interests of the consort. A generation earlier, the

57. JWDS 49.676.

58. JWDS 71.946.

59. JWDS 48.668, 49.676; XWDS 15.157–60.

60. Once source suggests that Woman Cao had become the formal wife of Siyuan long before her formal installation as empress in 930; see ZZTJ 268.8770–71.

principal concubine of Li Keyong, Woman Cao, the mother of Zhuangzong, was similarly characterized as self-effacing and politically aloof. The younger Empress Cao may have begun as less passionately involved with Siyuan, but they grew in intimacy over the course of their marriage, as evidenced by the pair sharing meals and entertainment on a regular basis, at which they were attended personally by Consort Wang. Empress Cao thereby came to influence her husband in private ways, consistent with her preference for modesty, but many actions attributed to Consort Wang likely emanated from consultations with the empress. In their mutual affection and lack of malice, the relationship between the two primary consorts of Mingzong mirrored something of the camaraderie shared by the spouses of Keyong.

Only one consort, Woman Wei, was elevated to empress after Mingzong's passing, due to the accession of her son as emperor in 934. A widow of commoner background but stunning beauty, she had been abducted by Siyuan during a military action at Zhenzhou, likely in 893; her son, Li Congke, was roughly nine *sui*.⁶¹ In time, she came to cohabit with Siyuan, while her son enlisted in his armies to earn his trust, before being formally adopted as son. The youth is portrayed in the dynastic history as "possessing a daring and imposing demeanor, scrupulous integrity, cautious tongue, plus a dauntless valor in combat that caused Mingzong to love him dearly."⁶² Empress Wei surely had a hand in shaping such positive attributes in her offspring, although she died sometime after moving to Jinyang. Both mother and son were Chinese ethnics, which confirms that Mingzong was highly inclusive in recruiting consorts, adopting sons, and even arranging marriages.

The most influential of Mingzong's consorts over the long haul, Woman Wang (d. 947), happened to rise from the most humble of circumstances.⁶³ She was born to a family of pastry makers at Binzhou, in central Shanxi, then worked for a while as servant in the home of a prominent commander of the Liang dynasty. Some years of homelessness ensued before she caught the eye of the future Mingzong due to her reputation for beauty of the sort that "causes flowers to wilt in shame." Consort Wang began as a sexual diversion who evolved into a political force in her own right by virtue of well-oiled palace networks. She was savvy enough to lavish gifts on members of the royal family in order to garner their goodwill. Even after the accession, Woman Wang often served the emperor and empress as menial servant, preparing his toilet, attending to her personal needs, or standing in attention as the imperial couple dined together, signs of her low self-esteem. At the same time, her close ties to Empress Cao and the eunuch Meng Hanqiong strengthened Consort Wang's position within the palace, enabling her to exert growing influence over affairs of the outer court. She gave birth to one daughter of record, who married Zhao Yanshou (d. 949), but apparently no

61. JWDS 49.676–77; XWDS 7.71; 15.158.

62. XWDS 7.71.

63. JWDS 49.677; XWDS 15.158–60; WDHY 1.16; ZZTJ 287.9366.

sons, so Mingzong allowed her to adopt a young boy, Congyi (931–947), the offspring of another consort, along with an orphan girl, to be raised in the household. Before long, the consort ran afoul of An Chonghui, the Military Commissioner intent on limiting the influence of palace favorites, although she enjoyed something of a reprieve after Chonghui's demise in 931. But Consort Wang became implicated indirectly in the intrigues of Congrong, the son purged by the emperor in 933, causing her to lose some favor in the final days of the reign, although she would live for another decade and wield considerable influence as the widow of a revered ruler.

The women in Mingzong's private life reveal much about his approach to building a family. His legal wife, Empress Cao, was valued preeminently for moral character. The consort most famed for beauty, Consort Wang, would cause the greatest trouble for the palace later in the emperor's life and after his death. A similar problem plagued other reigns in the Five Dynasties: legal wives tended to be more morally circumspect than consorts, women from elite backgrounds more ethically predictable than women outside the elite. The rule applies to Mingzong's predecessor as well, Zhuangzong, whose famously beautiful wife, Empress Liu, a woman of humble origins who supplanted his first wife after giving birth to a son, became the source of growing acrimony over the course of the reign.

Prior to the accession, the size of Mingzong's harem was typical of many men of means in the Five Dynasties, never exceeding several women. After the accession, his harem of twenty-two women, assisted by less than one hundred female workers, was miniscule relative to his predecessor, who acquired a harem reputedly of hundreds.⁶⁴ But emperors of traditional China generally recruited masses of consorts not chiefly for purposes of procreation or sexual diversion, as outsiders commonly think, but rather for the power over women that a vast harem symbolized. Mingzong's modest expectations with regard to this alluring symbol of monarchy and manhood make him something of an enigma. Advanced age partly contributed to the temperance in his sexual life, but the impression of his predecessor as sexually abandoned likely motivated Mingzong to set a better example for his own children.

Sons

The eldest son of Mingzong for the entire reign, Li Congrong, the offspring of Consort Xia, never managed to succeed his father, but his impact on the dynasty far exceeded the son who did. "He exuded a carefree elegance in demeanor and the perspicacity of an eagle in appraising others," the *Historical Records* writes, in affirmation of youth's superficial appeal to others. Congrong was also a skilled poet, who eventually attracted a sizable entourage of literarily inclined retainers. He loved pageantry as well: "Every time he entered court, the spectacle of several hundred cavalry to his front and rear,

64. WDHY 1.15–16.

galloping swiftly with bows taut and arrows cocked, left roadside observers awestruck.”⁶⁵ The emperor insisted on political experience for Congrong as a young adult, culminating in his appointment as overseer of Henan prefecture, the administrative seat for the capital. A succession of esteemed military titles came his way as well, additional signs of imperial favor. Military Commissioner An Chonghui eventually found the young man’s arrogant pretenses insufferable, but his reservations found little sympathy with the monarch. At the same time, Mingzong had refrained from installing either of his two adult sons as heir-apparent, in all probability to encourage improvements in Congrong, but the delay merely increased frictions between father and son to create an ugly confrontation in the emperor’s final days.

Emperor Mingzong’s sole male survivor, Li Conghou, likely a year or two younger than Congrong, emerges as the exact opposite in terms of personality and moral character. Dynastic histories describe him as “physically stout and sturdy with a propensity to be sparing in words, traits that enabled him to win a special place in the heart of Mingzong, whom he closely resembled.”⁶⁶ Dynastic histories identify Consort Xia as his birth mother, the same mother as eldest son Congrong. Born in Jinyang, Conghou appears to have received a classics-based Chinese education focused on the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, allowing him to acquire a modest grasp of its principal thrust. Mingzong was forty-eight *sui* at the time of Conghou’s birth, the age when fathers tend to pamper their children and Conghou has the markings of a pampered child, lacking the firmness of his father. In the end, the two boys personified the emperor’s own split personality: Congrong inherited his audacity as warrior, while Conghou acquired his political sensibilities. Sadly, neither son inherited both qualities.

To buttress his political résumé, the teenage Conghou was named the governor of Henan, followed by Kaifeng, Heyang, Zhenzhou, and Weizhou—some of the most strategic commands in the country. The postings benefited the son by separating him from the negative influences of the palace. Eldest son Congrong may have received higher salaries and titular honors, but Conghou held a wider range of posts. He enjoyed greater mobility because his personal security mattered less as a consequence of secondary standing in the succession. There are reports of dissension between the two brothers, especially jealousy on the part of the ill-tempered older son, problems clearly known to the monarch and his inner circle. There is no evidence, however, that Mingzong was prepared to break with Chinese convention by installing the younger son as successor, the preference of a rising body of advisors in the last years of the reign.⁶⁷

As fate would have it, Mingzong suffered the loss of his most promising potential successor, eldest son Li Congjing (d. 926). Apart from boasting a distinguished record of military service, Congjing possessed a remarkably positive set of character

65. XWDS 15.163–64; JWDS 51.693–95.

66. XWDS 7. 69–70; JWDS 45.613–23.

67. ZZTJ 278.9078–79.

traits like humility and civility, plus a moral compass far surpassing any member of his family, including his own father. Zhuangzong had appointed him to a senior post in the Palace Guard (*jinjun*) shortly before the final showdown between his uncle, the reigning emperor, and his father, the future Son of Heaven. Congjing had numerous opportunities to abscond after his father's mutiny in the fourth month of 926, but he elected to remain with Zhuangzong in the capital. He ultimately perished in the midst of a mission to find a political solution to the civil war within his own family. In effect, Congjing placed loyalty to state above devotion to father; he chose death with honor over life without. At a time when betrayals and backstabbing were the order of the day, Congjing displayed the sort of moral fiber that inspired historians a century later to comment, "Congjing accepted death as the cost of abiding by his ruler, his demise worthy of our lament!"⁶⁸ Few would disagree that the dynasty would have fared far better had Mingzong been succeeded by his eldest son, a man nearly thirty at the time rather than the presumptuous Congrong or the naïve Conghou, men barely twenty.

Emperor Mingzong fathered several other sons, including Li Congyi, a boy raised by Consort Wang but born to another consort.⁶⁹ The child's wet-nurse had an illicit affair with Congrong, Mingzong's irascible son, who used the wet-nurse to spy on the palace of his own father, a matter that came to light after Congrong's purge in 933 and nearly brought about the expulsion of Consort Wang. Another youth identified in some sources as an imperial son is Li Congcan (d. 929). His "free-wheeling spirit and propensity for ostentation," sources say, would rile strict disciplinarians at court like An Chonghui. The government eventually executed Congcan for sitting on furniture in the imperial residence during his father's absence from the capital, an act of *lèse majesté*. The *Historical Records* convincingly argues that Congcan was actually the emperor's nephew.⁷⁰ The youth never received the numerous conferrals of titular rank afforded biological sons Congrong and Conghou over the course of the reign. More importantly, Mingzong conceded to official pressures to slay Congcan after only modest resistance, unlike parallel cases of misdeeds by other family members. Officials would have been less adamant about the death sentence and Mingzong would have resisted longer were the youth a potential heir to the throne.

In many ways, the most formidable survivor of Emperor Mingzong was not his flesh-and-blood, but adopted son Li Congke, the Chinese boy surnamed Wang whose mother, Woman Wei, had been abducted by the future monarch during a military action at Zhenzhou.⁷¹ The boy was nine *sui* at the time and the older man in his late twenties. Congke evolved into a decorated warrior and strategist by his twenties, growing to seven Chinese feet in height.⁷² As an adult, he had other redeeming

68. JWDS 51.692–93; XWDS 15.161–62; CFYG 286.3226.

69. WDHY 2.20; XWDS 15.158–60.

70. WDHY 2.20; XWDS 15.167.

71. JWDS 46.625–26; XWDS 7.71–72.

72. One Chinese foot is roughly ten inches.

qualities, such as “a scrupulous sense of integrity and cautious tongue,” which further embellished the father’s high regard for him.⁷³ Early on, he acquired the nickname Asan as a sign of endearment. One modern scholar describes Congke as a man “with a Chinese body but Shatuo personality,” referring to his thoroughgoing assimilation of nomadic ways.⁷⁴ He served with distinction under Zhuangzong in the years preceding the founding of Later Tang in 923 and delivered him from many perilous straits in battle, causing Zhuangzong to exclaim, “Apart from being the same age as me, Asan’s daring in battle is similarly akin to my own!” The comments speak to the strength of the fraternal bonds between the two men, both born in 885, who had spent much of their youth together at Jinyang and moved in similar circles in later life. But the camaraderie shared with Zhuangzong did not extend to the surviving son of Mingzong, whom Congke held in contempt.

A lesser known adopted son of Siyuan was Li Congwen, who served as deputy interim regent of the northern capital, Jinyang, during the reign of Zhuangzong, receiving investiture as Prince of Yan. The *Historical Records* posits that he began as a nephew of Siyuan before formal adoption as son, making him one of the few Shatuo ethnics adopted by Siyuan. He is characterized as a highly imperfect son, who during the reign of Mingzong “once reproduced imperial accessories and costumes for his own illicit use.”⁷⁵ He dared to engage in such breaches of decorum due to the protection of his adopted father. Congwen served at five different provincial posts over the course of Mingzong’s reign, including governor of the strategic Dingzhou and Zhenzhou commands in the northeast. The prestige of the commands held is another indicator of favor in the palace. A multiplicity of sources depict him as a mediocrity devoid of political sensitivities, which may well explain Mingzong’s considered decision to limit his service to regional posts. Congwen subsequently survived his father to serve the Jin dynasty, suggesting amicable ties to Shi Jingtang in particular and the Shatuo military elite in general.

Surrogate Sons

Li Siyuan’s youth coincided with the rise of the Jin satrapy’s military might, as his own father by adoption, Li Keyong, presided over the expansion of a group of stalwart soldiers known as the Army of Surrogate Sons (*Yi’erjun*). Up to a hundred men skilled in battle or adept at strategizing had been adopted by Keyong to form the cream of a multi-ethnic fighting force, armies usually under the command of Keyong or some trusted confederate.⁷⁶ The men, a combination of Shatuo, Inner Asians and Han

73. XWDS 7.71.

74. Fu, “Shatuo zhi Hanhua,” p. 332.

75. JWDS 88.1156–57; XWDS 15.167–68.

76. XWDS 36.385–96; Fu, “Shatuo zhi Hanhua,” p. 325.

Chinese, were an invaluable asset in war, but they often proved a liability in peace, as aptly stated in the *Historical Records*: “Later Tang rulers had assembled the most intrepid and fiercely martial warriors of the age. Many contributed to its success at winning the world, yet the regime unraveled at their hands as well.”⁷⁷ Indiscriminate adoptions were widely practiced in the Five Dynasties to advance military objectives, practices hardly confined to the Shatuo, as the *Historical Records* seems to infer.⁷⁸

Family organization in Inner Asia seems more receptive to the practice of indiscriminate adoptions, where “family” and “tribe” are often conflated.⁷⁹ The popularity of the practice in the ninth and tenth centuries suggests a change in attitude toward adoption. Previously in China, the adoption of heirs was a social practice with legal sanctioning, where the rights and duties of both parties were strictly delineated. Chinese family organization tends toward exclusion rather than inclusion, employing “discrimination” (*bie*) to distinguish insiders from outsiders. Chinese families tend to regulate the recruitment of outsiders by limiting adopted heirs to members of the same surname.⁸⁰ But the loose family structure that allows for informal adoptions, as practiced among the Shatuo in the ninth and tenth centuries, runs against Han conventions.

By the tenth century, however, even military governors of Chinese ancestry had begun adopting sons indiscriminately. For example, the governor of Shu who later founded the Former Shu kingdom, Wang Jian, a contemporary of Li Keyong, adopted hundreds of sons during his long reign over Sichuan. Sibling rivalries should be understood in this context: the practice of fraternal succession prevalent in Inner Asia became interlaced with Chinese practices of father-to-son succession to create increased tensions, as siblings expected a greater voice in decision-making than Chinese convention allows.⁸¹ Thus, three of the four Later Tang successions were irregular by Chinese standards. Fraternal friction was also behind the death in 908 of Keyong’s surviving brother, Li Kening, who was accused of conspiring against his nephew, Cunxu, in order to succeed as Prince of Jin.⁸² Sibling rivalries turned violent at two independent states in the south as well, the Min and Southern Han, a sign that a practice originating in the north had spread to the other end of China.

77. XWDS 36.385.

78. Usually “adopted sons” refers to *yangzi* 養子 in Chinese sources, but informal adoptions often take the form of *yizi* 義子 (“surrogate sons”), while adoptions for purposes of providing a successor and inheriting property usually employs the term *jizi* 繼子. I can think of no comparable terms in English to describe the various forms of adoption in China, all of which involved changes in personal as well as surname. After adoption as a teenager, Mingzong appears to have grown up in the household of Li Keyong, so I refer to him below as an “adopted son,” while men raised by surrogate fathers later and life and outside the family compound, men like Yuan Xingqin, also known as Li Shaorong, are dubbed “foster sons.”

79. Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, p. 150.

80. XWDS 17.187–88.

81. Lewis, *China between Empires*, p. 147; *China’s Cosmopolitan Empire*, pp. 148–49.

82. XWDS 14.149.

An array of personalities can be found among the Righteous Sons of Li Keyong. Perhaps the most distinguished in the cohort was Li Sizhao (d. 922), a Chinese commoner native to Hedong depicted as “scrupulous and substantial in character.” He served his adopted father with rare filial devotion and forever relinquished alcohol consumption after a timely reprimand from Keyong for abuse of the substance. Sizhao possessed considerable martial valor, despite his diminutive physique. He was a frequent companion of Keyong in the 880s and 890s and became a role model for the other adopted sons. Sizhao even served with distinction as the prefect of Youzhou (modern Beijing), demonstrating managerial skills on par with his martial strengths. Indeed, he became so dear to the local populace that they did everything in their power to retain him in office, including “locking the gates to the city and forcing Sizhao to flee by night in disguise to avoid detection.”⁸³ He perished in the heat of battle at Zhenzhou a year before the Tang victory over the Liang, his death an immense loss for the next generation of righteous warriors, few of whom were as selfless in placing the interests of the Jin kingdom before private agendas.

The antithesis of the high-minded Li Sizhao was Li Cunxiao (d. 894).⁸⁴ A native of northern Hedong with the original surname of An, he began by assisting Keyong to secure vital lands to the east and south of Taiyuan, often against stunning odds. In one deadly confrontation, an enemy commander taunted the adopted son in hopes of inducing capitulation: “You Shatuo, without a hole to hide in, have no recourse to surrender.” Cunxiao responded with the sort of humor that cut through the tensions. “We Shatuo, in search of a hole to hide in, look forward to feeding your flesh to our troops. I entreat you to allow the portly men among you to join combat first!” And indeed the Shatuo prevailed in this particular battle, Cunxiao’s lieutenants inspired by his cocky self-assurance. But later in life, he allowed petty frictions with another adopted brother, Cunxin, to drive him to mutiny against Keyong. In the final meeting between father and son, Cunxiao pronounced defensively, “Your son, in serving the Prince of Jin, has an unblemished record of accomplishments. It is solely the machinations of Cunxin that has brought about the current mishap.” A bristling Keyong was not persuaded, insisting, “By drafting your call to war, you wronged me in every way. Did Cunxin do this as well?” He was quartered after reaching Jinyang, Keyong deferring to the will of his military council, but reluctantly in light of deeply held feelings for the talented youth. By the time of his death, Cunxiao had come to symbolize the self-destructive side of competition among the foster sons of Keyong.

83. XWDS 36.386–87.

84. XWDS 36.391–93; JWDS 53.714–17.

The Supreme Sibling Rivalry

Ultimately, the competition between Cunxiao and Cunxin was so keen because their gifts were equally prodigious. A generation later, Siyuan and Cunxu would clash for similar reasons, a sign that the practice of wholesale adoptions was the regime's most serious challenge as it transitioned from conquest to governance in the mid-920s. As a rule, the Army of Righteous Sons was a hotbed of feuding egos, conditions that worsened as the young men grew old. At the heart of the problem was the spread in age for the dozens of sons adopted by Keyong. Recruited over several decades, many youth were closer to him in age than to his eldest offspring, Cunxu. Thus, they could neither regard the son as peer nor accept his authority as emperor. Siyuan typifies the problem: eleven years younger than Keyong and seventeen years older than Cunxu, he resented the younger man's sense of entitlement. A generation later, a twenty-something Mingzong would adopt a son, Congke, a man almost thirty years older than his designated successor, Conghou, which similarly wreaked havoc on dynastic fortunes. History repeated itself during the Later Tang due to conflicting attitudes toward family within the regime's two largest ethnic groups, the Shatuo and the Chinese.

During the Later Tang's formative years, from the death of Keyong in 908 to the founding of the dynasty in 923, the tensions between Cunxu and Siyuan festered to produce a steady stream of confrontations beneath the veneer of fraternal goodwill. The incidents themselves often seemed trivial, but action and reaction served to force subliminal suspicions to the surface and set the two men on a collision course. For example, Siyuan's sharp eye for martial talent caused him to recruit the scrappiest fighters for his own armies, which in turn made his forces invincible in battle. In the campaign against Yan in 913, he captured Yuan Xingqin, a valorous militia leader, then cemented bonds by adopting him. Cunxu soon learned of Xingqin's abilities and arranged a transfer to his own bodyguard, while conferring another name, Li Shaorong.⁸⁵ The action became an early indicator of competition between the two brothers over the kingdom's most important asset, skilled warriors, as Cunxu siphoned martial talent from Siyuan's armies. A deputy to Siyuan, Gao Xingzhou, anxious to deflate suspicions now apparent to the rank-and-file, reminded Cunxu sometime around 915: "It is solely in the service of Your Highness that we cultivate a cohort of stalwart soldiers."⁸⁶ The reassurances changed little and Cunxu began adopting foster sons to create his own rival network, after shunning the practice in early life. The incident highlights the intensely personal nature of loyalties between the adopted sons and their surrogate fathers. Cunxu saw himself as procuring the loyalties of Xingqin

85. XWDS 25.270. The generational identifier for Shaorong (Shao) differs from that for Zhuangzong's eldest son Jiji (Ji), which confirms that foster sons adopted late in life were treated differently from formally adopted sons. But there are other cases of adoptions where the same generational identifier is used.

86. ZZTJ 269.8794.

through a simple change of name, which in turn became the basis for building a deeper relationship. Although fighting nominally under the Jin banner, many if not most foster sons were loyal first and foremost to the individual commander with whom they shared the added bond of fictive kinship.

Tensions between Cunxu and Siyuan surfaced again in the late autumn of 923 at a banquet for decorated Liang commanders in the wake of capturing the capital. The dead emperor's chamber for formal audience had been selected as venue, a stage that automatically placed the assemblage of high-profile deserters on edge. At some point during the feast in a toast to the men, Cunxu, his eyes fixed on Siyuan, a pivotal leader of the final drive, mused provocatively, "My most intimidating foes in years past joining us in revelry today—who but *you* could have brought this about?" Those final words horrified the men in attendance, victors and vanquished alike, who sensed a combination of jealousy toward the brother and mistrust toward them. The entire group fell flat on the floor in terror, except for Siyuan, at which point Cunxu's ominous tone turned suddenly jocular: "I am merely poking fun at my chief officer, Siyuan. Your apprehensions are hardly justified!"⁸⁷ The levity intended by Cunxu had fallen flat. Moreover, the anecdote suggests that the bitter rivalry between the two brothers had evolved into a more visible rift whose repercussions might well extend to anyone associated with Siyuan. One officer in attendance at the Kaifeng event, Huo Yanwei (d. 928), a senior Liang defector, would become a subordinate of Siyuan and a confederate in the cabal against Zhuangzong several years later, the first banquet laying the seeds for his subsequent disaffection. It did not take long before differences between the brothers by adoption became grist for the rumor mill, including swarms of prognosticators given to nesting with the powerful to inflate their egos and play on their insecurities.

Sometime around 922, the fortune-teller Zhou Xuanbao, a face-reader of wide repute, was entreated by a friend of Siyuan to distinguish him from an imposter in a test of the man's talents. After handily identifying Siyuan, Xuanbao proceeded to reveal his "precious promise beyond words" (*gui bu ke yan*) as potential ruler of mankind.⁸⁸ It was widely known that the term "precious promise" had been used by a prognosticator centuries earlier to characterize Taizong of Tang, then prince, which fostered suspicions that turned him against his own elder brother.⁸⁹ An obviously flattered Siyuan later tried to recruit the man for as retainer, relenting only under pressure from civilian aides more sensitive to appearances. Gossip about imperial ambitions rose to high places all the same, prompting Zhuangzong to plant informants to conduct surveillance over Siyuan. His overreaction served to further poison already strained relations, leading to an outright rupture by early 926.⁹⁰ Superstition and rumormongering were

87. XWDS 46.505; JWDS 30.412, 417; 64.852.

88. XWDS 28.309; JWDS 71.945–46.

89. JTS 2.21; XWDS 28.309.

90. XWDS 38.408; 51.573.

a lethal combination in the politics of the Five Dynasties, entrapping even the best of emperors.

Cast of Political Characters

The preeminent political presence at Mingzong's court was An Chonghui (d. 931), a native of Yingzhou, home of the imperial ancestors in northern Hedong.⁹¹ His father had descended from a family of local braves and served with distinction under Li Keyong. Chonghui is identified by the sources as a northerner (*huren*), but likely not a Shatuo ethnic. He had evolved as a trusted lieutenant of Keyong's adopted son, Siyuan, for a decade preceding the accession. A man of sharp mind, dedicated service, and scrupulous discipline, Chonghui proved uniquely gifted as strategist and military manager, gifts that made him a central figure in the mutiny at Weizhou that propelled Mingzong to power in 926. He subsequently held the post of Military Commissioner from the very outset of the reign and retained it for the next four and a half years. His position allowed for sweeping oversight over civil and military affairs, a combination of powers rarely afforded civilians.

Much like Guo Chongtao, his predecessor as military commissioner under Zhuangzong, An Chonghui was preeminently a master of strategy and logistics, his experience in battle negligible relative to the other figures in Mingzong's inner circle. The Five Dynasties had no shortage of courageous commanders, but ironically, it did suffer from a dearth of men able to apply their intellect to the game of war, handle the logistics of war, and formulate plans for post-war security, men commonly dubbed in the sources as "senior aides" (*li*). Although illiterate, Chonghui managed to handle these chores through assistance from a cluster of civilian leaders handpicked by him. He led the court's campaign against official corruption, often imposing the harshest penalties allowed by the law, but he managed miraculously to live by the same ethical standards: he left an estate of less than several thousand strings of cash at the time of death, scarcely enough for his own burial. (The biography of Chonghui in the *Historical Records* deserves a careful read, as it represents one of the most artfully crafted narratives in the entire work.)

Another prominent military commissioner in the last years of Mingzong's reign was Fan Yanguang.⁹² A Chinese native of Xiangzhou (modern Anyang, Henan), Yanguang could boast service to the Jin kingdom dating to the days of Li Keyong. Later, he served under Siyuan during his tenure at Xiangzhou, evolving into a revered lieutenant. Yanguang was also held in high regard by the future Zhuangzong, for whom he once served as emissary during negotiations with a Liang defector. Although incarcerated

91. JWDS 66.873–76; XWDS 24.251–57; ZZTJ 269.8805; Wang Gungwu, *The Structure of Power in North China*, pp. 155–56.

92. JWDS 97.1285–88; XWDS 51.576–81.

by the enemy, he refused to divulge state secrets and resisted pressure to shift loyalties. Yanguang could also boast battlefield experience in the decade preceding the Tang unification of the north, proving consistently cautious about strategic risks. After a stint as senior military officer under Zhuangzong, he became a quick convert to Mingzong in 926. A year later, he figured prominently in the government suppression of the Kaifeng renegade Zhu Shouyin (d. 927), where he led an advance guard. This second event signaled a new appreciation of Yanguang by the monarch, who had joined campaigners.

Emperor Mingzong held An Chonghui and Fan Yanguang in high regard as dedicated professionals, but there is little evidence of intimacy with either man. The contrast with Shi Jingtang, a man twenty-five years younger than Mingzong, is striking.⁹³ This native of Jinyang was the offspring of Woman He and Nielieji, a skilled horseman who had served under Li Keyong as lieutenant, although the two men belonged to different Shatuo confederations. The family adopted Shi as their surname rather late in their history, most likely during Jingtang's own lifetime, which suggests that he was less acculturated in Chinese ways relative to the offspring of Keyong. He began as a lieutenant in the armies of Zhuangzong as well as Mingzong, on separate occasions delivering both men from dire straits on the battlefield. Dynastic historians laud Jingtang's skills as horseman and archer, a gift for "grand strategies" grounded in classical warfare, and a character of "solemn sincerity and few words." His uncanny sense of timing would place him at critical crossroads in the topsy-turvy history of Shatuo rule in China.⁹⁴ He was a critical presence during the mutiny at Weizhou in 926, spurring Siyuan into rebelling against the dynasty. During the reign of Mingzong, Jingtang led the suppression of Zhu Shouyin at Kaifeng in 927 as well as the Shu intervention in 930, the administration's most important domestic crises. A long professional association with the monarch was buttressed by marriage to his eldest daughter, the Yongning Princess.⁹⁵ Jingtang would ultimately establish his own dynasty, the Later Jin, an unimaginable feat without more than a decade of mentoring at the hands of Mingzong.

The fourth leading military figure in Mingzong's administration was Kang Yicheng (d. 934).⁹⁶ Born in the Daibei region of northern Shanxi, Yicheng hailed from one of the three Shatuo confederations in the region. He initially joined the armies of Keyong and subsequently played a pivotal role in Zhuangzong's fifteen-year conquest of North China, serving as head of elite cavalry units dubbed the "Furious Stampede," due to the intensity of their assaults. Yicheng's tenure under the command of Mingzong was far shorter than that of Shi Jingtang, but he did play a defining role in the Weizhou uprising of 926. Sensing ambivalence in the future monarch about joining the rebel

93. JWDS 75.977–89; XWDS 8.77–86.

94. XWDS 8.77.

95. WDHY 2.22.

96. JWDS 66.879–80; XWDS 27.296–97.

tide, Yicheng provided a timely incentive by turning sheer opportunism into an act of dynastic salvation:

His Majesty [Zhuangzong] exhibits no concern for the welfare of the ancestral altars and cares little for the toil of warriors, but instead engages in debauchery and the pleasures of wine and music. Today, a recourse for survival will surely emerge if you accept the council of this body of military leaders, but you face certain annihilation by insisting on loyal submission to the current regime!⁹⁷

His evocative words persuaded Mingzong, who subsequently held the surrogate in high regard. Yicheng was deployed as governor of the strategic Heyang command and later recalled to the capital to serve as overseer over the elite imperial bodyguard (*shiwei qinjun*). He represents one of the most enduring commanders of the era, despite his penchant for placing personal interests before loyal duty, especially in the waning years of the reign.

Sadly, none of the martial protégés of Mingzong compare favorably to him in terms of native ability, as reflected in his capacity to evolve from hardened soldier into visionary sovereign. The deficiencies of men in his inner circle of military advisors may represent to some degree an indictment of the emperor's approach to recruitment, inasmuch as elevation to those esteemed ranks required a close relationship with Mingzong in addition to a long professional association with the Later Tang government, and ideally its predecessor, the Jin satrapy. This shortsighted strategy for filling the most important posts in the land would have serious ramifications for the dynasty in the wake of the emperor's passing. Fortunately, this imperfect cohort of military leaders was balanced by a stellar cluster of civilian advisors.

Among the civilian courtiers during the reign, Feng Dao (882–954) presents one of the most powerfully compelling narratives on the times, its challenges as well as opportunities.⁹⁸ Native to Yingzhou, in modern Hebei, Dao initially served the asinine satraps of Yan, where Liu Shouguang had imprisoned his own father before seizing power. Dao subsequently turned to the Prince of Jin for sanctuary.⁹⁹ He served initially as secretary to the Jin, his frugal lifestyle and selfless generosity impressing the future emperor. Dao served as deputy minister of finance and Hanlin academician under Zhuangzong, his tenure cut short after several months due to mourning duties for his father. His restoration to office two years later coincided with the mutiny of the future Mingzong in the fourth month of 926, an event that culminated in the unexpected death of Zhuangzong. Rather than waiting for the dust to settle in the struggle between the two camps, Dao rushed to Luoyang to join other officials in embracing the elevation of Mingzong to interim custodian and later emperor, an endorsement critical to swaying the hearts of other civilians in government. Dao's career would flourish like

97. JWDS 66.879.

98. JWDS 126.1655–66; XWDS 54.612–15; Zhang Qifan, *Wudai jinjun*, pp. 21–22.

99. XWDS 39.422–27.

few others under the new administration. He became Duanming academician in the fifth month of 926 and soon thereafter chief councilor, a post that he retained for the entire reign.

A man of extremely humble origins, Feng Dao was often scoffed at by contemporaries for his peasant mannerisms and lack of social graces, precisely the qualities that a monarch with his own deficiencies in pedigree would find refreshing. Dao's speedy ascent to the administration's highest offices and academies reveals much about the political courage of Mingzong, who remembered that the worst of incompetent courtiers under his predecessor were men of vaunted pedigree. Dao held onto power by being at once optimistically principled and pragmatically adaptable. Few civilian courtiers of the time could move as comfortably between the civilian and military branches of government and few Han Chinese statesmen were as sensitive to the sensibilities of his Shatuo patrons. In the many conversations with the emperor that appear in subsequent chapters, Dao emerges as a man of rare insight into the ever evolving needs of his government. He also possessed an almost philosophical appreciation of the human condition, becoming the emperor's personal tutor and political guide in the process. A century later, Dao became the object of derision by historians as a comprador of sorts; this attitude is reflected in the *Historical Records*, which reviles him for serving four of the five dynasties, including two alien regimes, the Shatuo and the Kitan.¹⁰⁰ But the conduct of Dao under Mingzong was beyond reproach. Dao deserves a more balanced treatment that gives due consideration to his first decade in the public eye, where he left an indelible imprint on court affairs while bettering the lives of the people. He had rightly appraised his own day as a moment of rare opportunity for the public servant, so he served with the sort of dedication noticeably absent a decade later under demonstrably lesser rulers.

Another eminently able civilian leader during Mingzong's early reign was Ren Huan (d. 927).¹⁰¹ Although native to the western capital of Changan, Huan was raised in Jinyang, the Shatuo capital in Hedong, where Li Keyong developed a "profound affinity" for his father, Ren Maohong, and arranged a marriage for Huan's younger sibling, Ren Tuan, to his own niece. Each of the five sons of Maohong possessed unique talents, with Huan depicted by historians as "exceptionally elegant in demeanor and effective in debates." He served the Jin satrapy in various civilian support positions in the locales, including Luzhou and Zhenzhou. Huan's ability to combine "benevolence with courage"—that is, his creative intermingling of the best in civil and military cultures—instantly impressed the Prince of Jin, who named him governor for the strategic Zhenzhou and Dingzhou in 923. By late 925, Huan's initially minor role in dynastic fortunes would radically change with his assignment to the Shu campaign, where he

100. XWDS 54.611–12.

101. JWDS 67.894–96; XWDS 28.305–07; Wang Gungwu, *The Structure of Power in North China*, p. 151.

served as adjutant to the Prince of Wei, Jiji, Zhuangzong's eldest son, then nominal overseer for the campaign. Over the course of several months, Huan would witness a shocking succession of events: the death of Guo Chongtao in Chengdu, the suicide of Jiji near the western capital, and the slaying of Zhuangzong in his own palace. In his meeting with Siyuan in the fourth month of 926, at the conclusion of the Shu campaign, Huan sufficiently impressed the future emperor that he elevated him to chief councilor from the very outset of the reign, later expanding his duties to include oversight over its Fiscal Commission in order to make the most of his famous managerial skills. His one-year tenure was among the shortest under Mingzong, but Huan's life and death doubles as a mirror on the political uncertainties of the early reign.

Another courtier of moral probity was Zhao Feng (d. 935).¹⁰² Native to the northeast, Youzhou, Feng hailed from an established family, "famed for their training in Confucianism," only to flee the region due to the ineptitude of the local governor. Financially well-to-do, Feng is best remembered for his charity towards others and strong sense of civic duty. He was also a powerful advocate of Confucian values and viscerally hostile toward Buddhism: his histrionics in exposing a bogus tooth of the Buddha, which he smashed to bits in the presence of the emperor, is reminiscent of Han Yu's famed memorial a century earlier repudiating another religious relic, the Bone of the Buddha, with its strong xenophobic resonances.¹⁰³ Feng initially served the Liang dynasty at Yunzhou before converting to the Prince of Jin after he acquired the city. An appointment ensued in the capital as Hanlin academician in 923, soon after the accession of Zhuangzong. The reign of Mingzong led to further honors as Duanming academician and chief councilor starting in 931. Zhao Feng's rising star at court coincided with the dominance of Feng Dao and the pairing of the two men proved highly fruitful at the outset. They often worked in concert with a succession of military commissioners, advising them on political conventions, historic precedents, and institutional oversight, in addition to mundane matters like the preparation of documents. Zhao Feng was among the most pointedly critical members of the civilian administration, to his own detriment in the end.

The final prominent civilian at the court of Mingzong, someone a generation older than Feng Dao, was Li Yu (d. 935).¹⁰⁴ He hailed from a clan long on pedigree, the Li of Zhaojun, although Yu spent his formative years in Parhae (Bohai), an autonomous state in southern Manchuria. An erudite of the classics with expertise in Confucian rituals, he earned the highly coveted "erudite literatus" degree (*boxue hongci*) and entered public service in the waning years of the Tang dynasty. Yu later served the Liang dynasty, then the Later Tang as receptions officer and Hanlin academician. Like Ren Huan, Li Yu also played a visible role in the Shu campaign in 925, at the invitation

102. JWDS 67.889–90; XWDS 28.308–10.

103. Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Emperor*, pp. 175, 270.

104. JWDS 67.890–94; XWDS 54.620–21.

of the emperor's son, Jiji, whom Yu served as administrative assistant. He provided a sometimes harsh counsel to oversee Guo Chongtao, once pressing the armed forces to advance against Shu at a time when most officers preferred to hold back. Yu's assertive posturing and astute instincts reflects exceptional comfort with military men and issues of warfare, a remarkable feat in light of his illustrious ancestry. He was a dignified man of principle who preferred to sleep on tattered rugs in affirmation of his aloofness to material things. But a personality inclined to be excessively direct and stubborn made for a difficult colleague.

The aforementioned civilian advisors of Mingzong were Chinese ethnics by all indications, men with the necessary literacy to govern the country on behalf of marginally literate military men. They hailed from different parts of the country, none from the ancestral home of Hedong. In fact, two of the four councilors, including Feng Dao, came from the Yan region centered on present-day Beijing, where the ineptitude of the last governor created a hemorrhage of talent to the Shatuo base. The contrast with the military leadership at Mingzong's court is striking, a multi-ethnic group from a fairly narrow geographic region that revolved around the old base of central Shanxi. Emperor Mingzong's inner circle, whether civilian or military, was diverse in terms of class background as well, unlike the pedigree-conscious Tang dynasty at its height.

The administration had an impressive record of recruiting senior civilians capable of crossing professional lines. Chief councilors Ren Huan and Li Yu possessed extensive experience in commanding armies and laying strategic plans, their dual credentials no doubt critical to their sudden leap to power. It is also noteworthy that two of the aforementioned chief councilors had personal experience during the campaign against Shu in 925, which began as a ringing victory only to devolve into a pit of internecine conflict that ruined a succession of illustrious careers while toppling an emperor. Their presence likely tempered the will of the new emperor for direct military intervention in Sichuan on the scale of the past, except as a last resort. Mingzong's preference for negotiation over military confrontation in dealing with the overlords of Sichuan is often seen as a simple reaction to the policies of his predecessor, an assumption that understates the influence of these veterans of the Shu campaign, Ren Huan at the outset and Li Yu toward the end.

Chapter 2

Royal Passage

For most of his life, Li Siyuan, was renowned for his daring gambles as strategist and resourcefulness in a dogfight. But perhaps more pivotal to his destiny to be Son of Heaven was the camaraderie that he shared with ordinary soldiers in the trenches, bonds that forged such adulation among his underlings that they rallied to elevate him to the throne with little in the way of prompting on his part. But the ascent of Siyuan was neither serendipitous nor sudden. He played an equal, and at times even greater, role than Li Cunxu, the nominal founder of Later Tang, in transforming a small satrapy in northern Shanxi into the uncontested sovereign of North China and the bulk of Sichuan, a process that evolved incrementally over several decades. I have detailed that spectacular journey in my biography of Zhuangzong. In this volume, I focus on Siyuan as emperor, the last decade of his remarkable life. Nonetheless, some background is needed to contextualize his ascent to power, and particularly the array of talents that made him fiercely favored by a preponderance of peers in the military, yet feared in equal measure by an influential minority in the palace of his predecessor. These conditions allowed a garden-variety mutiny to mushroom into a wider insurgency that changed the course of the dynasty in short order, largely for the better.

The Slow Climb

The early value of Siyuan to two generations of Shatuo princes was entirely of a martial nature. At a youthful seventeen *sui*, he managed to deliver Li Keyong from perilous conditions on the battlefield. In 896, at just over thirty *sui*, he served as deputy to one of Keyong's most decorated commanders, adopted son Li Cunxin, in a mission to deliver Jin confederates Zhu Xuan and Zhu Jin from the bombardment of Liang armies at the prefectures of Yanzhou and Yunzhou in modern Shandong.¹ Siyuan did so by deploying a contingent of three hundred crack cavalry in a "furious stampede," to prevail over vastly superior numbers. His reputation spread further in late 898, as Sizhao, the adopted son of Keyong's brother Li Kerou, came under enemy assault.²

1. JWDS 26.353, 35.482–83; XWDS 36.386.

2. JWDS 26.355, 35.483; XWDS 6.53; ZZTJ 260.8518–19.

Upon reaching the spot where Kerou had been pinned down, Siyuan dismounted his horse and proceeded to an elevated position, then drew column lines along the left and right. Confused about his intent, Liang warriors were caught off guard when contingents led by Siyuan and Sizhao suddenly appeared to pummel them from multiple directions. The enemy could only retreat in ignominy as Siyuan returned safely to home base, his body punctured with four arrows. A euphoric Keyong greeted him by removing the coat on his back to apply to Siyuan's wounds, impressed by the capacity of the young man to vanquish foes by the right combination of brains and brawn.

Li Keyong's esteem for his adopted son reached new heights some three years later, as the Shatuo capital at Jinyang came to be besieged by Liang armies some fifty thousand strong.³ With Jin forces concentrated within city precincts, the prospects for relief from the outside were next to nil. Keyong thus deployed Siyuan and Sizhao to break through enemy embankments in a drive from within the city. Fortunately, the morale of the Liang aggressors had hit an all-time low as a consequence of prolonged rains that produced a massive epidemic among soldiers exposed to the elements for many months. Before long, the Liang command suspended its offensive altogether, a humiliating decision for the most powerful satrapy in its day. Shatuo armies were famed for laying their own sieges and prevailing through superior organization and quick adaptation to changes in the field. But as the anecdote above illustrates, they were equally adept at decimating the battlements of others, identifying weak links and charging through them.

The eldest son of Keyong, Li Cunxu, who succeeded him as Prince of Jin in 908 at twenty-four *sui*, assigned one of his earliest missions against the Liang dynasty to the forty-something Siyuan.⁴ The hotly contested Luzhou had been under siege for a full year, defended by Li Sizhao, the foster son of Keyong's brother. Previous attempts by Keyong on the eve of his death to arrange relief of the city had met with unmitigated failure. Liang armies had enjoyed a sizable advantage in numbers, forcing Sizhao to compensate by having a personal presence on the frontlines of war. Zhou Dewei joined Siyuan in relieving Luzhou from the north. Within days, the combined forces of the two Jin commanders had succeeded in demolishing enemy barricades to force a full retreat. The Liang had lost in excess of ten thousand men in the debacle, including hundreds of commanders and their deputies. Before long, Siyuan began to compare favorably to Zhou Dewei, the decorated Jin commander, in the eyes of peers.

One of Siyuan's legendary missions under Cunxu involved the war against Yan in the northeast, a command situated closer to the Shatuo base in Shanxi. The region had been controlled by Liu Rengong, a fair-weather ally of Li Keyong, and subsequently his son Shouguang.⁵ Some years later, Yan's leader chose to repudiate the Jin and launch

3. JWDS 26.357, 35.483; ZZTJ 262.8552.

4. JWDS 27.369, 35.484, 52.704–05; ZZTJ 266.8694–95.

5. JWDS 28.379–82; ZZTJ 268.8769–78, 269.8780–82; XWDS 25.270, 39.426–27.

raids against its confederates in the vicinity, while assuming the title Son of Heaven. As the Shatuo extended their influence eastward from Shanxi to Hebei, the warlords of Yan and Jin were certain to be drawn into conflict. The Jin used the containment of Yan as cause for an intervention that changed the map of North China in historic ways. The war against Yan, which spanned much of 912 and 913, was directed from Jinyang by Keyong's successor, Cunxu, who in turn entrusted conduct of the war to Zhou Dewei and Siyuan, the beginning of Siyuan's association with this important borderland.

Jin commanders led thirty thousand men against Yan, sources say, which if accurate, represented a substantial portion of the satrapy's military might at the time. They were assisted by an even larger number of confederates from neighboring commands. The initial task of Jin armies involved isolating Youzhou from satellite cities like Chan, Zhuo, Shun, and Wu, after which Youzhou itself came under a full siege. Jin strategists also moved to isolate Yan from its ally to the north, the Kitan, a task that required speed to deny the northerners time to respond to events on the ground. Still, the siege of Youzhou persisted for over a year, due to an indigenous army in excess of fifty thousand and impregnable walls. Over the course of the next year or two, the Shatuo succeeded in showcasing their skill at scaling walls and digging tunnels. They also proved adept at the politics of war, securing the defection of a succession of commanders in the city and beyond. Some defections came through negotiation as in the case of Li Hui, others through bitter combat, like the warrior Yuan Xingqin (d. 926), whom Siyuan personally defeated in hand-to-hand combat before adopting him as son. Over a lifetime, clemency for the vanquished figured prominently in Siyuan's appeal as commander. The final surrender of Youzhou at the end of 913 came through negotiations conducted personally by the Prince of Jin, who by then had joined Siyuan and Zhou Dewei at bases along the walls of Youzhou.

Siyuan also played a significant role in the acquisition and consolidation of Weizhou, one of six prefectures comprising the Tianxiong command (modern Daming, Hebei), an area whose strategic symbolism far outweighed its small size. The command had functioned as a semi-autonomous satrap dominated for a century by a succession of hereditary governors and a rabble-raising "governor's guard" (*yabing*). In 906, Weizhou came under the sway of Zhu Wen, the Liang founder, who imposed a governor in 912, Yang Shihou.⁶ Upon the death of Shihou in 915, the dynasty tried to weaken the command by dividing it in half, which triggered a mutiny that ended in the purge of the incoming governor and liquidation of his bodyguard of five hundred. The subsequent chaos permitted the Prince of Jin, Li Cunxu, to intervene with his own army from Hedong, having already secured the allegiance of a cluster of cities directly north of Weizhou.

6. XWDS 25. 236, 42. 462–63, 39.415–18; ZZTJ 269.8786.

The occupation of Weizhou by the Shatuo and their confederates proved remarkably uneventful: the Prince of Jin slayed a handful of mutinous ringleaders, but otherwise pardoned the rank-and-file.⁷ And to ensure the area's stability in the future, Cunxu moved decisively to relocate from Jinyang to Weizhou, which became his base for the next eight years as well as home for his immediate family. After securing the area, the Shatuo imposed "summary executions for soldiers guilty of rumor-mongering or violence against the people," intent on harnessing the region's notoriously unruly military.⁸ The Jin also made the fateful decision to jettison the Liang dynasty's plan to weaken the command by siphoning off half of its six prefectures, opting instead to maintain control through a strong military and political presence. Sources say that Siyuan was also based not far from Weizhou at the time.⁹ The Tianxiong command would stand at the center of dynastic politics for decades to come, so Siyuan's early posting in the area positioned him to reap the benefits of proximity to power.

As the Shatuo expanded into the northeast, the former Yan satrapy, they were certain to come into conflict with the Kitan over Youzhou. The area's critical role in securing the northern border could not but elevate the importance of Siyuan as chief overseer of defenses in the region. In the earliest showdown, in 917, the Kitan unleashed a force of tens of thousands to besiege Youzhou for a total of two hundred days. Despite vastly inferior numbers, Shatuo armies under Siyuan ultimately prevailed by deploying more agile smaller units, while doing a better job of coordinating the kingdom's infantry with cavalry. Siyuan also proved adept at maximizing the element of surprise through clever maneuvers and actions involving camouflage and deception. In one instance, Jin armies led by him and another adopted brother, Li Cunshen, burned piles of firewood and hay to create enough smoke to prevent the Kitan from knowing the size of their armies, which must have been smaller than the enemy assumed.¹⁰

By now, Siyuan had identified the Achilles' heel of Kitan armies: the larger the cavalry, the slower the response time. The smaller Jin contingents could be more agile in the field. His strategy for containing the Kitan involved tactics akin to guerilla warfare today: he would lure them from their positions of strength—the open plains where their horseman could dominate—into ravines or other enclosed spaces where the Shatuo could lay in wait.¹¹ Siyuan also came to employ daredevil tactics to intimidate foes, once lecturing his men "to engage the adversary without regard for personal consequences" (*lin di wang shen*). He later introduced a similar focus to governing, expecting as much of himself as he did of others.¹² Finally, Siyuan possessed a little-known personal asset, command of another Inner Asian language. In the heat of one

7. JWDS 28.385; ZZTJ 269.8789.

8. ZZTJ 269.8790–91.

9. JWDS 28.387.

10. ZZTJ 269.8818.

11. CFYG 45.490.

12. JWDS 35.485–86; ZZTJ 270.8816–18.

conflict, he employed a “barbarian language” (*huyu*) to hurl insults at his adversary.¹³ We never learn which language was employed, but clearly Siyuan appreciated the value of using verbal utterances to demoralize the other side. More importantly, language competence was critical to accessing military intelligence, including the interrogation of spies and prisoners-of-war. Shatuo armies ultimately routed the Kitan at Youzhou, the enemy losing ten thousand men either as casualties or prisoners-of-war. The victory catapulted Siyuan to new heights.

Along the Jin kingdom’s southern border, Siyuan played an equally prominent role in defending its interests at Desheng Post (*zhai*), a site straddling the Yellow River (modern Puyang, Henan).¹⁴ The Shatuo leadership learned in 921 of a planned raid against the city’s northern positions through a Liang defector, allowing it to act preemptively. The Prince of Jin dispatched Siyuan and Congke, Siyuan’s adopted son, to engage in subterfuge by laying ambushes at the nearby town of Qicheng. Congke somehow managed to replicate a banner for the other side, which allowed him to rush barricades manned by Liang armies to slay a watchman, then flee with the man’s head hanging from his hand. Exploiting the ensuing agitation within enemy ranks, Siyuan personally led several thousand armored horsemen against hordes of foot-soldiers from the Liang camp. And he prevailed, despite the vastly inferior quality of body armor for his own men. The Liang lost a stunning twenty thousand men in the debacle, most of whom perished amidst mass executions.

Desheng Post would also figure prominently in the final contest between the Liang and Later Tang dynasties that started in the summer and continued through the autumn of 923.¹⁵ The dynastic histories cite Siyuan as the inspiration behind the wildly adventurous scheme to target Kaifeng, the Liang capital, for immediate conquest, rather than to continue the current strategy of moving methodically against a panoply of towns directly south of the Yellow River, a strategy that had produced unacceptably high casualties and strained the patience of the war-weary high command. Eight years after the acquisition of Weizhou, the Shatuo needed a breakthrough and the timing seemed right. “The military standoff along the Yellow River has persisted for far too long,” Siyuan insisted. “Unless some extraordinary step is taken, no break can occur on our larger agenda.”¹⁶ He saw the moment as opportune, noting that the Liang had invested heavily in a recent offensive against the prefectures of Ze and Lu (modern Shanxi), at the expense of other cities along the eastern front like Yunzhou. The Liang capital of Kaifeng seemed uniquely vulnerable, and its fall would trigger the collapse of the entire empire. Such knowledge of enemy conditions came through the defections of the storied Liang commanders Kang Yanxiao and Duan Ning, who reported

13. ZZTJ 270.8818.

14. JWDS 29.399–401; ZZTJ 271.8868.

15. JWDS 29.405–08, 35.486–87; ZZTJ 272.8887.

16. XWDS 6.54.

worrisome levels of intrigue at the court and battle fatigue at the front—another rare convergence of vulnerabilities for the regime. The schemes of Siyuan seemed counter-intuitive at the time, advancing against a city some forty to fifty kilometers south of the Yellow River, a city exceedingly well fortified with armaments, even if momentarily short on manpower. But the high-risk strategy promised the sort of payoffs that allowed Siyuan to persuade the Prince of Jin and his senior strategist, Guo Chongtao.

The first tactical maneuver in the proposed raid on Kaifeng, upon which the entire strategy rested, involved deploying Siyuan and a relatively small contingent of five thousand crack troops for an assault against Yunzhou (modern Shandong), as a larger group risked detection by border guards. Siyuan's men departed under the cover of pouring rain toward the end of the intercalary fourth month of 923 and proceeded without stop until reaching their final destination at daybreak, another ploy to elude border patrols. The city of Yunzhou fell handily for lack of preparations and manpower. But the strategic town of Desheng along the Yellow River continued to draw fire from Liang defenders, forcing Cunxu to remain there through the summer months. To the east, Siyuan made major inroads against government forces at Difang, a town near Yunzhou. These forces included the eminent Liang commander Wang Yanzhang, who was routed toward the end of the ninth month and perished with a reputed twenty thousand men.

Cunxu and Siyuan approached Kaifeng from their base at Yunzhou early in the tenth month of 923, a mere five months into the well-calibrated incursion, the final foray progressing in a matter of days before the city surrendered. The dynasty's last emperor, then thirty-six *sui* perished in the capital by suicide on the ninth day (923.10.09), while the city capitulated with minimal damage to infrastructure and few casualties of war. The military leaders of Luoyang surrendered in short order under the leadership of Zhang Quanyi (d. 926), an enormous political victory for the new monarch. Shatuo armies at Kaifeng and elsewhere had refrained from plunder, under strict orders from the senior leadership. Precisely as Siyuan had predicted, the regime itself disintegrated within less than a month after the capital fell, as governors from over fifty commands petitioned to surrender their seals of office. Standing at the gates of the capital in near disbelief, Emperor Zhuangzong exclaimed deliriously to Siyuan, "I have won the world thanks to your bodacious presence on the battlefield and fully intend to share it unconditionally with you."¹⁷ The statement confirms Siyuan's unparalleled contribution to the larger conquest, a rare admission for the highly egotistical Zhuangzong, but the younger man's grand promises rang hollow. No sooner were the words uttered than the familiar frictions resurfaced.

17. JWDS 35.487.

The Aborted Reign of Zhuangzong

Zhuangzong had launched the Tongguang reign of Later Tang with high expectations due to his winning record in war, but his administration took a negative turn early on due to the mediocrity of his circle of intimates, the insularity of his Inner Palace, and the haste with which he reached critical decisions. In the twelfth month of 923, two months after acquiring Kaifeng, the new monarch moved the capital to Luoyang, the “eastern capital” in Tang times, anxious to inhabit the same physical spaces of his fictive ancestors. In the process, the government abandoned Kaifeng, situated at the heart of the Grand Canal, the country’s most important transportation artery. He had managed to unify North China largely through default, in the aftermath of sweeping defections by regional governors. These men expected to continue to govern their commands with considerable autonomy, which set them on a course of certain conflict with a government committed like its predecessor to centralizing military powers.

Even more disconcerting was Zhuangzong’s decision to restore eunuchs as palace cronies, men who assisted in the collection of taxes and the supervision of armies in ways reminiscent of the last century of Tang rule. The Liang dynasty had systematically liquidated eunuchs in the capital from the very outset, replacing them with members of the outer court, so the new administration’s directives about eunuchs were regressive in spirit. Zhuangzong also moved to elevate an entire cohort of court performers devoid of political experience to positions of real power, including Jing Jin as chief censor or Shi Yanqiong as Weizhou governor, must have been unprecedented. Favoritism of this sort emanated from a lifelong passion for singing and acting, but the political consequences proved weighty, as reflected in the stirring chapter on “Actors and Musicians” in the *Historical Records*. But sadly, precisely the court performers privileged to high office would play a prominent role in the monarch’s early demise. In addition, the Middle Palace of Zhuangzong, led by Empress Liu, often intruded into affairs of court. Trying to keep his spendthrift habits in check, she maintained a treasury separate from the emperor’s personal privy and kept its contents a veritable state secret. The practice allowed the Middle Palace to influence resource allocation with little in the way of accountability. Unfortunately, the miserly Empress Liu alienated the civil service and the armed forces alike, leaving the administration with few friends.¹⁸ The outer court was left with little real power, despite the moral outrage of a few personalities.

The dominant political figure under Zhuangzong was Guo Chongtao. Native to Daizhou, the Shatuo homeland in northern Hedong, Chongtao began as a lieutenant of Meng Zhixiang, the future Shu governor, later rising to senior military advisor to Cunxu, the Prince of Jin. Chongtao initially served the prince as military manager and strategist, playing a major role in the suppression of insurgents at Zhenzhou in 921 and the invasion of Kaifeng in 923. Despite negligible battlefield experience, his strategic

18. For my biography of Zhuangzong, see Dai, *Lingren, wushi, lieshou*; XWDS 37.397–402.

gambles generally paid off. But in peace, Chongtao governed conservatively by preserving the institutions, conventions, and values indigenous to the Middle Kingdom. Chongtao served for nearly three years as military commissioner for Zhuangzong. A frugal man at heart, he opposed frivolous spending by the palace, including a tower in the suburbs of Luoyang that Zhuangzong began constructing in 925. Chongtao lost the fight over the tower, but he had won praise across the capital for relinquishing the entirety of his personal wealth to subsidize the Mingtang ceremonies, which as shown below, commonly cost many millions in strings of cash.

The fiscal economy demanded by the military commissioner created enemies for him in many quarters, and especially the Middle Palace of Empress Liu. Guo Chongtao's censure of imperial decisions ranging from policies to personalities would undermine his standing with the monarch as well. His demise in the early days of 926, mere months before the emperor's own death, was a function of the invasion of Shu, which began as a stunning victory for the north in the closing months of 925, only to degenerate into struggles within the military elite that ended in the death of Chongtao at Chengdu. Zhuangzong had given credence to rumors that his military commissioner was amassing riches and armaments in Sichuan as the first step toward asserting independence from the north. The liquidation of Chongtao, his family, and the families of numerous associates would leave others apprehensive. Zhuangzong was now deprived of his best political assets.¹⁹

Emperor Zhuangzong had maintained the appearance of goodwill toward Siyuan out of necessity, namely, the ongoing strategic concerns along the northern border, which remained volatile, despite the consolidation of Shatuo power in the central plains. Siyuan had just completed in early 924 a short but successful campaign against the Kitan, whose armies had again threatened Youzhou. His deputy for the campaign was Huo Yanwei, the former Liang commander. The administration had already ordered Siyuan's return to the capital when the Kitan again intervened in the same theater, one month after their previous retreat. Siyuan offered to resign as Pacification Commissioner out of embarrassment over succumbing to the enemy's ruse. He also worried about malicious slanders against him by key actors in the emperor's inner circle, men familiar with the bad blood between the adopted brothers.²⁰ Zhuangzong rejected Siyuan's resignation after a private meeting and deployed him to suppress a mutiny at Luzhou instead, a mutiny already quashed on the eve of Siyuan's arrival.²¹ A brief stint followed in late 924 as governor of the Xuanwu command centered on Kaifeng, a city whose proximity to the capital allowed for greater scrutiny. The assignment was interrupted before long by fresh raids along the northern border, which compelled the administration to reassign Siyuan to Zhenzhou (central Hebei), closer

19. XWDS 24.245–51; JWDS 57.763–72.

20. JWDS 31.425–46; ZZTJ 273.8911, 8917–19; *Liao shi* 2.15–21.

21. ZZTJ 273.8922.

to the Kitan threat. The area had seen much in the way of military instability in the years preceding the unification of North China in 923, so the presence of someone of Siyuan's stature must have been reassuring to locals.²² But the distance now separating the imperial brother from the court left it even more dependent on his good intentions.

In the last months of 924, the Kitan, after a high-profile campaign against Parhae, chose to redirect a sizable portion of their armed forces to the Chinese theater, focusing on Youzhou. They had intended to bolster their strategic interests in the area, even though the simultaneous presence of Kitan soldiers as far west as Hedong, the old Shatuo base, suggests a secondary desire to probe border defenses to the south. The capital nonetheless waited until the twelfth month of 924 before finally dispatching Siyuan to Youzhou, where he vanquished the northern armies in the span of two months and captured several hundred military leaders.²³ From the end of 924 through much of 925, Siyuan was posted north of the Yellow River to improve response time to a potential border threat. His positive role in the region should have bolstered imperial confidence, but to the contrary, each victory only heightened anxieties about the administration's excessive reliance upon him.²⁴

Toward the end of 925, after a year's absence from the capital, Siyuan returned to Luoyang under a cloud of uncertainty. In the seventh month, he had petitioned to leave his post at Zhenzhou for a visit to the capital in order to pay his respects and to offer condolences for the death of Dowager Cao, the emperor's biological mother. As the adopted son of Li Keyong, Siyuan regarded her as a stepmother. No doubt, Siyuan also wished to address residual misunderstandings with the palace.²⁵ Zhuangzong declined his offer without specifying the reasons, although Siyuan likely received the refusal as a snub. In reality, the emotionally distraught monarch, preoccupied with the mourning rites and burial preparations for his mother, cared to see no one.

The government's undue reliance upon Siyuan came to the fore once again when senior military aides reviewed potential leaders for the Shu campaign, at which point Zhuangzong insisted on sidestepping Siyuan, the obvious choice in the eyes of many.²⁶ He cited Siyuan's "indispensability to defending the northern border" to exclude him.²⁷ Imperial apprehensions about the adopted brother had been further stoked by Guo Chongtao, the military commissioner. Better known for logistics and strategizing, not fighting in the field, Chongtao tended either to diminish Siyuan's martial feats or to exaggerate them for purposes of containing him. Chongtao had long opposed Siyuan's deployment to Sichuan, where poor communication links to the capital would inevitably afford sweeping discretionary powers for commanders in the field. Apart from

22. JWDS 32.448; Zhang Qifan, *Wudai jinjun*, pp. 44–46; ZZTJ 273.8923, 273.8928, 273.8931.

23. ZZTJ 273.8928, 273.8931.

24. JWDS 32.445–49.

25. JWDS 35.487–88; XWDS 6.55.

26. XWDS 24.250.

27. ZZTJ 273.8936; JWDS 57.768.

diminishing his official record, Chongtao once urged the throne to summarily dismiss Siyuan or to pay one day for his superior appeal. He noted, “Commander-in-chief Siyuan cannot remain for long the subject of another man, as he is without peer in the royal family!” Chongtao’s solution involved preemption by liquidating the charismatic adopted brother, whom the palace recalled to the capital before long.²⁸

The suspicions of Zhuangzong as pertain to Siyuan would eventually shape government policy through Guo Chongtao, a man with his own reasons to be cynical. In the end, Chongtao was selected for the Shu mission, the only military leader without a powerbase away from court. Even then, the palace erred on the side of caution, investing general command of pacification armies to Jiji, the Prince of Wei, the emperor’s teenage son. Chongtao would serve nominally as senior deputy to the prince, but in reality, he exercised comprehensive oversight over the campaign. Despite the deliberateness of Zhuangzong’s decision to dispatch Chongtao to the southwest and retain Siyuan in the north, conditions in both theaters would deteriorate faster than anyone imagined. Sadly, Chongtao’s absence from the capital left Zhuangzong uniquely vulnerable to the intrigues of palace favorites and a disgruntled military.

Unruly Guards and Bodyguards

In dispatching to the southwest a force of some sixty to eighty thousand men in the fall of 925—as much as one-third of the country’s military assets at the time—Zhuangzong had presumed stability in his own backyard, a reasonable assumption based on conditions in recent years. He hardly anticipated a mutiny in the early months of 926 at a familiar hotbed of insurgency. Mutinous armies at Beizhou, one of the six prefectures comprising the Wei/Bo command, had proceeded to kill their military director, while elevating as leaders Huangfu Hui and later Zhao Zaili. The men immediately issued a statement indicting the government for long deployments far from home. In effect, the military rotations intended to enhance the responsiveness of local armies to the capital, a far-sighted policy with roots in the previous dynasty, were achieving the opposite by compromising morale.²⁹ The contagion of insurgency at Beizhou soon spread to Weizhou, heart of the Wei/Bo command. The government had recently returned Military Director Yang Renzheng after a yearlong absence, a positive overture to the region, but not enough to appease locals. Once the mutiny erupted, it forced the Military Commission to revisit its shrinking roster of potential suppression leaders, but this time without input from Guo Chongtao, who died months earlier.

Zhuangzong initially tapped Yuan Xingqin, the lieutenant with the adopted name of Li Shaorong, to lead the Weizhou suppression, a woefully poor choice. He arrived with an army of several thousand Palace Guardsmen, a fraction of the numbers

28. ZZTJ 273.8931–32.

29. JWDS 34.469–72, 70.926–27, 90.1177–78; XWDS 25.271, 46.503–04; ZZTJ 274.8958–60.

needed, compelling him to attempt a negotiated settlement with the rebels on short order. In the face of their obstreperousness, Xingqin retreated to Chanzhou having accomplished little besides further emboldening the rebels. Zhuangzong had erred twice, first, in sending the wrong man for the job, and second, by grossly underestimating insurgent strength, inexcusable miscalculations for a man who had used the city as base of operations for eight years. Days later, Xingqin returned to Weizhou for a second offensive, recruits from nearby Chanzhou bringing his force to ten thousand. Still, government armies were rebuffed again. By now, Zhuangzong offered to lead the suppression in person, but courtiers countered predictably, "The capital is the foundation of the empire. Your Majesty cannot casually take leave."³⁰ A succession of advisors began to press for Siyuan's deployment, pressure that the emperor resisted for many days.

Siyuan happened to be in the capital at the time, having arrived in the twelfth month of 925, two months after the burial of Zhuangzong's mother. The emperor had proven inconsolable since her passing and remained ill-tempered. Siyuan's presence in Luoyang allowed the palace to employ Zhu Shouyin, a one-time servant now entrusted with the military police, to fraternize in order to gauge Siyuan's fealty. The wily policeman instead divulged the emperor's suspicions of him, saying "To elude catastrophe, you must find some way to return to your district." Such words effectively turned the policeman into an agent against the sovereign. Siyuan wisely refused to leave Luoyang, knowing that a hasty departure would create a greater cloud of suspicion. After all, government policy required petitions to leave the capital and unauthorized travel was a grave offense. Worse yet, the highways were ideal places for assassins to murder enemies of the palace without drawing public attention.³¹ In the interim, two of the emperor's closest associates, the eunuch Ma Shaohong, and the longtime governor of Luoyang, Zhang Quanyi, came to press for Siyuan's deployment to Weizhou, arguing that he alone could prevail.³² Zhuangzong's hands were tied, and his charismatic brother secured safe passage to a place beyond the easy reach of the palace.

Leading a contingent from the Palace Guard, the organization presumed most loyal to the monarch, Siyuan reached Weizhou on the sixth day of the third month (926.03.06), assisted by senior guardsman Huo Yanwei. Almost immediately, they had to stand down a mutiny within their own ranks, prompting Siyuan to query, "For the bodyguard of the Son of Heaven no less, how can you possibly turn around and mimic renegades!" The professional soldiers had begun to empathize with their targets, the Weizhou insurgents, and wanted no hand in a suppression certain to end in a slaughter. They had somehow learned of a secret decree conveyed to Siyuan as he left Luoyang prescribing the liquidation for mutineers down to the last man, knowledge that the

30. JWDS 34.473; XWDS 45.491–92; ZZTJ 274.8963–64.

31. JWDS 35.488; XWDS 51.573.

32. JWDS 34.473, 35.488; XWDS 38.408, 45.492; ZZTJ 274.8957.

soldiers could only have acquired from Siyuan or his closest aides. The guardsmen boldly threatened to ignore the decree:

What crime did the men of Wei commit? As soldiers on assignment, they simply sought to return home and did so without requesting authorization. The Son of Heaven refuses to consider leniency, but insists upon a ruthless extermination. Rumor has it that they will be slain en masse once the city falls, soldiers merely scared to die and otherwise disinclined to treachery.³³

Clearly, Palace Guardsmen were convinced that Weizhou locals had been the victims of the insensitive policies of the Military Commission in the capital or the caprice of local commanders. Recruits for the Palace Guard often came from local armies like the ones at Weizhou, so their sympathies made perfect sense.

The insurgents at Weizhou grew more assertive as the hours turned into days, now pressing Siyuan to accede as emperor of the lands north of the Yellow River, leaving rule over the south to Zhuangzong. The proposal suggests a sense of alienation among northerners as a consequence of shifting the capital from Weizhou to Luoyang in 923, a setback for the prestige of the city, whose armed forces were presumably cut back and leaders transferred elsewhere. A tearful Siyuan tried to reason with the guardsmen, but they formed a circle around him with weapons drawn. He could either join them or die at their hands. Siyuan chose to live, which required allying with presiding officer Zhao Zaili (882–947), a man of little credulity. The above scenario based on numerous sources was devised to deny Siyuan any active role in the subterfuge against the throne, which is sufficient cause to question its veracity, but an eerily similar episode, the Chenqiao Incident, occurred in the Northern Song with the elevation of Zhao Kuangyin (939–976), when the military rank-and-file coerced an initially ambivalent leader by thrusting the imperial robes upon his back.³⁴ The powerlessness of commanders in the face of such strong-willed lieutenants cannot be dismissed as pure fancy. It was part and parcel of the times, a time when the tail commonly wagged the dog.

Siyuan entered Weizhou with his deputy Huo Yanwei at his side, the two men feted by the rebels as discussions ensued about the next course of action. But the bulk of Siyuan's armies beyond city walls faced harassment by government regulars in his absence. Many absconded, others perished. Deprived of an army, Siyuan now found himself dependent on the goodwill of the Wei military, an army with a history of cannibalizing its leaders. To his good fortune, it took mere days for loyal lieutenants An Chonghui and Shi Jingtang to summon some five thousand subordinates from Zhenzhou, Siyuan's most recent home base. Siyuan then emerged from Weizhou to rally thousands of additional soldiers, allaying fears that he had succumbed to some mishap.³⁵ Among the early supporters of Siyuan at Weizhou was Fu Xi, a longtime

33. XWDS 46.505.

34. *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 5, pp. 210–13.

35. JWDS 35.489, 64.852, 75.980, 91.1209; ZZTJ 274.8967.

loyalist of Zhuangzong who was swayed to join rebel ranks after numerous appeals. A similar scenario unfolded for Huo Yanwei, a senior figure in the Palace Guard, who now backed Siyuan against the court.³⁶ Another recruitment target was Li Congke, Siyuan's adopted son, who shared a long personal and professional association with Zhuangzong, but would affirm a higher loyalty to his adopted father by delivering vital cavalry support in a timely fashion.³⁷ Several thousand additional horses became available after the defection of Kang Fu, the administrator of a farm for breeding warhorses near Weizhou who enjoyed access to stores of cash and a wide range of supplies.³⁸ In this way, military aid and moral support flowed to Siyuan from many quarters.

Additional options became available to Siyuan after amassing an army. He initially considered returning to Zhenzhou where as governor he had access to local resources and where his wife and family still resided. But the brevity of his tenure there meant fewer contacts to draw upon, while the city's distance from the capital was certain to impede negotiations with the court. The strategist An Chonghui pressed Siyuan to be more adventurous by occupying Xiangzhou (modern Anyang, Henan), a city south of Weizhou but north of the Yellow River, where he could access a wider network of potential supporters while proceeding with negotiations with the capital. Siyuan ultimately concurred and relocated to Xiangzhou. Up to several messengers a day were sent to Luoyang from the new base, only to be intercepted time and again by Yuan Xingqin. Having fled Weizhou a month earlier, Xingqin insisted on maintaining a firm line of defense south of the city. For days, perhaps even a week, Siyuan received no response from Luoyang and inferred a negative answer in the silence.³⁹ But the wishes of Zhuangzong and Siyuan were becoming irrelevant in the face of the growing intransigence of advisors.

At this moment of uncertainty about the government's perception of events at Weizhou and anxiety about acts of retribution against him, Siyuan's preeminent concern was the safety of family members. Eldest son Li Congjing commanded an Imperial Guard regiment in the capital. The honor doubled as ransom and Zhuangzong had every reason to retaliate by slaying him, but he elected to enlist the son's services as mediator instead, blaming the entire affair on armies at Weizhou and promising blanket pardons for Siyuan and his confederates. If true, the statement highlights the vast chasm between the court and its minions in the field over any effort to resolve differences through negotiations. Congjing never reached Weizhou: he was seized by Yuan Xingqin and returned to Luoyang. Once there, Zhuangzong was so moved by his fidelity that he adopted Congjing as son and changed his personal name to Jijing,

36. XWDS 26.278; JWDS 37.509.

37. JWDS 46.625–26; XWDS 7.71.

38. JWDS 35.489, 91.1200.

39. ZZTJ 267.8731, 269.8804, 274.8969.

insisting on employing the generational identifier of his own offspring.⁴⁰ It turned out to be the only sanguine moment in a month of disheartening news from the front.

The rest of Siyuan's family was also exposed to possible retribution for his misdeeds, despite the distance separating them from Luoyang. His trusted protégé, the thirty-something Shi Jingtang, was brutally honest about the futility of negotiation: "It is rare for any general commander to elude retribution when his subordinates turn mutinous on assignment!"⁴¹ In other words, promises of clemency matter little and the current tactic of disassociating himself from his rank-and-file will hardly sway skeptics at court. Jingtang offered a more proactive alternative, that is, a rush on Kaifeng, a city some two hundred kilometers south of Xiangzhou, to place his armies south of the Yellow River. Seizing the strategic city of Kaifeng would strengthen Siyuan's hand by placing him in closer proximity to Luoyang, but with the declared intent of proving his innocence to the world, which fell short of sedition in Jingtang's estimation. The difference was solely a matter of semantics. Having occupied Xiangzhou without authorization, Siyuan was already in rebellion.

Senior officers Huo Yanwei and Kang Yicheng, along with the strategist An Chonghui, also rallied around the scheme to advance against Kaifeng. As the former Liang capital, Kaifeng was more politically meaningful to insurgents, while its location at the heart of the Grand Canal promised easy access to financial supports for the insurgency. Together, they swayed Siyuan, whom sources characterize as originally reticent.⁴² Once committed to storming Kaifeng, Siyuan moved to insulate his remaining family members from retaliation by local authorities. From the base at Xiangzhou, his emissaries clandestinely contacted governors and custodians at four different commands to neutralize senior administrators, cajoling some and coercing others.⁴³ The most critical contact was Zhenzhou, residence of Consorts Cao and Wang, their offspring, and presumably some grandchildren. Even before agents of Siyuan could arrive, Wang Jianli, a military officer at Zhenzhou, brazenly assassinated the military inspector to inoculate Siyuan's family from the usual calamity.⁴⁴ A parallel scenario unfolded at Kaifeng, where Siyuan's eldest daughter, spouse of Shi Jingtang, was protected from punishment by authorities as they awaited her father's arrival.⁴⁵ The success of four contacts in different parts of the empire suggests a well-oiled network of allies working in concert for the mutinous governor. The same network enabled backers of the insurgency to intercept ships on the Grand Canal containing cargoes of tax proceeds to bankroll the movement.⁴⁶ The court in Luoyang, faced with financial

40. JWDS 35.489.

41. XWDS 8.77–78; JWDS 34.474; ZZTJ 274.8969.

42. JWDS 35.489, 64.852; ZZTJ 274.8969.

43. ZZTJ 274.8969.

44. XWDS 46.512.

45. JWDS 6.823; XWDS 25.275.

46. ZZTJ 274.8971–72.

pressures of its own, resorted to collecting summer and autumn taxes in advance, even as the private treasury of Empress Liu contained sizable sums of hidden wealth.⁴⁷ The different approaches to a financial emergency symbolized something more profound: Zhuangzong employed the conventional tool of collecting taxes in advance, whereas Siyuan's sensitivity to popular perceptions caused him to target the lucrative commercial sector for special assessments.

Commander Yuan Xingqin had left the front at Weizhou for urgent consultations at Luoyang. By the middle of the third month of 926, sometime after Xingqin returned to the capital, the secret plans of the Xiangzhou rebels had made their way to the capital. Xingqin was still unaware that Kaifeng was on the verge of falling to insurgents and proposed an imperial progress to the city, having assumed that the emperor's presence would stir the hearts of men in the field.⁴⁸ Zhuangzong headed eastward accompanied by Congjing, Siyuan's eldest son. Xingqin also headed in the direction of Kaifeng, although apparently at a different pace, causing his group to be separated from the imperial party. The emperor and his guard, awaiting reinforcements, moved methodically toward Sishui, located in the eastern suburbs of Luoyang. Siyuan and his confederates evinced no such reticence: crossing the Yellow River, they infiltrated Huazhou in short order, a prefecture located directly north of Kaifeng. Zhuangzong released the captive son of Siyuan once again in a final attempt at mediation. As he headed eastward, Congjing was apprehended for a second time by Xingqin, who pummeled him to death in retribution for his father's treachery without regard for the emperor's own wishes.⁴⁹ The slaying now precluded any possibility of resolving the contest peacefully. Siyuan succeeded in overtaking Kaifeng on the twenty-sixth day of the third month (926.03.26), mere days after Congjing's death, intent on revenge for the senseless slaying of his oldest son.

Zhuangzong had spent four critical days at Sishui, awaiting a contingent of cavalry from Kaifeng.⁵⁰ He had barely reached Xingze, a county roughly one hundred kilometers west of Kaifeng, when Siyuan swept the city, greeted in its suburbs by Prefect Kong Xun (d. 932). Siyuan's confederate Shi Jingtang had managed to claim Kaifeng without resistance of any note, despite a miniscule exploratory force of several hundred men.⁵¹ With the emperor approaching Kaifeng from the west and Siyuan from the north, Kong Xun had arranged identical greeting parties and paraphernalia for both men. "Whoever arrives first, enters first," he instructed guards at the gates.⁵²

47. ZZTJ 274.8968.

48. XWDS 25.272; ZZTJ 274.8970; JWDS 35.489.

49. JWDS 35.488–89, 70.927; ZZTJ 274.8970–71. The chronology for the third and fourth months of 926 is problematic for the Basic Annals of both Zhuangzong and Mingzong in the *Old History*, so I have relied here on the *Comprehensive Mirror*.

50. XWDS 25.275.

51. JWDS 94.1252; ZZTJ 274.8971–72.

52. XWDS 43.474.

The ambivalence of the prefect's loyalties to the throne reflected poorly on his own ethics, not to mention the judgment of courtiers who entrusted the strategic city of Kaifeng to an opportunist like Xun. Another factor in the speedy surrender of Kaifeng was the frequent redeployment of the cream of the city's military crop for an assortment of special duties, depriving the city of its fittest professionals. The policy had been intended to diminish the stature of the Xuanwu command, capital of the former dynasty, but it unwittingly relegated the security of Kaifeng to men neither especially capable nor dedicated.

Siyuan had effectively replicated the raid on Kaifeng three years earlier, which of course, he had guided from conception to execution. Yet admittedly, he also possessed superior organization on the ground and goodwill among officers. He arranged for negotiators to precede his armies along the entire course from Xiangzhou to Kaifeng to neutralize potential opposition, starting with Wang Yanqiu, commander of a nearby garrison.⁵³ A careful mix of artful diplomacy and modest coercion also occurred in the Kaifeng suburbs, where an officer initially loyal to the throne, Xifang Ye, defected to the insurgents with little in the way of coercion.⁵⁴

The defections of many within the Imperial Bodyguard provide further evidence of a well-oiled machine working on behalf of Siyuan, even within the emperor's own security apparatus. An officer dispatched eastward by the government with several thousand crack cavalry, Yao Yanwen, lost up to one-third of his army before even reaching the city: they rushed Kaifeng not to suppress mutineers, but to swell their ranks, complaining that "Zhuangzong had come to be deluded by Yuan Xingqin," his zealous but muddled lieutenant.⁵⁵ Many of Yanwen's men were Kaifeng natives motivated more to reunite with families than to risk their lives for a ruler unpopular in many quarters. In time, Siyuan would punish Yanwen for his "lack of loyal devotion to his sovereign" to convey the message that members of the Imperial Bodyguard must be loyal to the institution of monarchy, regardless of the deficiencies of individual monarchs.⁵⁶

Zhuangzong had reached Wansheng garrison, the suburbs of Kaifeng, when he learned of Siyuan's success at securing the city. His bodyguard reduced to ten thousand men due to desertions, he returned to Luoyang in the company of an even smaller group of loyalists led by Yuan Xingqin. A swell of desertions in the Palace Guard had coincided with a mutiny in Luoyang's metropolitan police, units in part staffed by imperial favorites. In a palace courtyard without the usual security, Zhuangzong was hit by a stray arrow and perished on the first day of the fourth month (926.04.01). Palace attendants gathered up his remains for consignment to a pile of burning musical

53. XWDS 46.510.

54. ZZTJ 274.8971–72; JWDS 61.863. Another source says that Xifang Ye returned to the fold of Zhuangzong; see XWDS 25.275.

55. JWDS 34.475, 35.489; ZZTJ 274.8972.

56. JWDS 35.489.

instruments, his most cherished objects in life.⁵⁷ Sometime before expiring, he had been abandoned by his wife, Empress Liu, numerous consorts, and family members, who chose to scatter widely in search of sanctuary, rather than die with dignity at his side. On the heels of his death, “a sweeping plunder of the capital by military personnel ensued,” according to the chief of military police for the capital, Zhu Shouyin, prompting him to invite Siyuan to accelerate his progress to Luoyang on the pretext of restoring order. Shouyin was the palace spy who months earlier had betrayed the confidences of Zhuangzong by divulging his suspicions of Siyuan.⁵⁸ In reality, the emperor had perished just one day earlier, so Shouyin’s depiction of the plunder as “sweeping” was cynically designed to justify a speedy takeover of the city by insurgents.

The Tepid Regent

Sources report that Li Siyuan, a man known for a fairly free expression of emotion, “wept bitterly” upon learning of his adopted brother’s passing. He deftly used the occasion to be generous in praising the dead man, while blaming others for his failed administration. “The monarch had formerly won the hearts of the armed forces and came to this tragic end through the petty intrigues of a handful of intimates,” he stated, alluding to military advisors like Yuan Xingqin and palace aides like Guo Congqian.⁵⁹ Siyuan had departed for the west even before the emperor’s unexpected death in Luoyang, which he learned about at Yingzi Ravine (near Zhengzhou). His armies then accelerated their advance westward, reaching the capital on the third day of the fourth month (926.04.03), exactly two days after Zhuangzong’s passing.⁶⁰

Pursuant to his arrival in the capital, Siyuan tried to lower expectations by informing the police chief, “After completing service to the dynasty by finalizing burial arrangements for the Former Emperor, I intend to resume the governorship of Zhenzhou, the post held by me in the past, to defend the northern stretches of our empire.”⁶¹ The statement suggests a short and simple mission. Having come to Luoyang with the intent of clearing his good name and restoring order, Siyuan seemed initially disinterested in higher aspirations. For now, the country had no emperor and the imperial brother, sensitive to appearances, initially lodged at a private residence in the city’s suburbs, waiting six days before discreetly relocating to the Xingsheng Palace, in the eastern wing of the imperial compound.⁶² Zhuangzong still had at least one adult son and numerous younger siblings scattered across the country, dedicated eunuchs leading

57. ZZTJ 274.8972.

58. ZZTJ 275.8975.

59. ZZTJ 275.8975; JWDS 35.490.

60. JWDS 35.490, 91.1196.

61. ZZTJ 275.8976.

62. ZZTJ 275.8978.

armies in the locales and loyal officials in regional posts.⁶³ There were many potential conclusions to this scenario, only one of which involved the elevation of the adopted brother to Son of Heaven.

Siyuan immediately issued bans on public looting in reaction to the plunder by the armed forces days earlier, then arranged for the remains of the former monarch, then partially cremated in the open air, to be gathered and coffined in preparation for a fitting burial. He also conferred with the chief councilor, Doulu Ge (d. 927), and a broad spectrum of civil and military officials, where tears drenched the lapels of virtually everyone in attendance, including Siyuan, who had known the bright but irascible Cunxu since childhood and perhaps loved and hated him in equal measure. Some senior aides to the dead emperor pleaded for Siyuan to move quickly in formalizing powers as his successor, pleas firmly rejected by him:

It was after accepting the imperial mandate to punish brigands at Weizhou that I faced the misfortune of a rancor within my ranks. From the outset, I had intended to appear at court to explain matters, but I was impeded by Yuan Xingqin. Events in this way have run amok—they do not represent my original intent. Your proposals [for me to accede as emperor] come too soon and do not merit careful consideration. I implore you against raising the matter again.⁶⁴

Siyuan declined a similar petition on the sixth day before a larger group that included Huo Yanwei, an early convert at Weizhou. A similar determination is reflected in Siyuan's reiteration of his refusal on the eighth day (926.04.05): "Your misguided ideas do not deserve further consideration!" Yet participants at the same meeting explored at some length the delicate matter of dynastic name, should the brother proceed with the succession, discussions that imply some measure of receptiveness to the idea on the part of the interim leader. At this point, Siyuan seems to have been more concerned about the appropriate timing and protocol for the transfer of powers than the act of accession itself.⁶⁵

During his early days in Luoyang, Siyuan had a face-to-face meeting with a military director of some distinction, Hou Yi, who was a native of Pingyao, a town located south of the old Shatuo base at Jinyang that survives to this day. Yi had insisted on "confessing his crimes" in a plea for clemency, part of the standard ritual of capitulation for men ending up on the wrong side of history. A month earlier, he had served at Weizhou as an arm of the government's suppression, but in the face of Siyuan's mutiny, he returned to the capital rather than join the rising tide of insurgents. His loyalty stirred tears in Zhuangzong, sources say, in the final beleaguered days of his life. But Siyuan dissuaded Yi from proceeding with the confession: "You have been steadfastly

63. Chen Zhen, *Xu Tang shu*, 37.344.

64. ZZTJ 275.8976.

65. JWDS 35.490–91.

loyal. What need is there to confess?”⁶⁶ This particular act of clemency for Hou Yi had been calibrated to confirm that Siyuan intended no retribution for men loyal to the former monarch during the period of transition, even when the individual’s actions went against the interests of the interim government.

On the ninth day of the fourth month (926.04.09), a directive of some symbolism emanated from palace in the name of the “interim overseer of affairs” (*jianguo*), the title assumed by Siyuan some days earlier. He had been meticulous about avoiding the appearance of presumptuousness, so he issued orders in the form of “directives” (*jiao*), the term generally used by empress dowagers acting on behalf of underage emperors. Siyuan scrupulously avoided the term “imperial mandate” (*zhaoling*), nomenclature reserved for reigning sovereigns.⁶⁷ He also instructed officials near and far to assist in facilitating safe passage to the capital for the biological brothers of the former emperor, most of whom had scattered widely after the coup in Luoyang.⁶⁸ Siyuan conceded at the time, “The principle of a surviving brother succeeding the deceased monarch presents no problem for me.” The statement infers a receptiveness to fraternal succession to fill the political void, even though the imperial brothers were neither distinguished in battle before the accession nor prominent in court affairs afterward. The consideration of fraternal succession was partly due to the youth of Zhuangzong’s eldest son Jiji, then likely in his late teens, and partly out of deference for early Shatuo traditions that favored mature rulers. And the statement was sufficiently ambiguous about the meaning of “brother” to possibly include adopted sons like Siyuan.⁶⁹

The search for biological survivors implied a genuine commitment to political continuity in the succession by retaining the same line of paternal descent, consistent with Chinese tradition. Four younger siblings of Zhuangzong were still alive or believed to be alive when the directive was issued, but they all perished before the fourth month had ended. Two of the dead emperor’s surviving brothers, Cunwo and Cunba, had fled northward to Jinyang after the coup, no doubt expecting residents of the Shatuo homeland to extend sanctuary, but they were killed either by their own subordinates or local authorities. Two other brothers, Cunji and Cunque, had fled for the south, but never progressed beyond the suburbs of Luoyang, where they were hunted down and murdered. The last two deaths came at the orders of the interim regent’s senior advisor, An Chonghui, a man installed as military commissioner since the beginning of the fourth month. “Our sovereign, a man both benevolent and virtuous, will surely refuse to bring harm to the imperial brothers,” he insisted. “In order to unite the hearts of men, we should act by secret decree.”⁷⁰ Chonghui dispatched his own lieutenants to a commoner’s home in the countryside to liquidate the two brothers. Siyuan would

66. ZZTJ 275.8976.

67. ZZTJ 275.8978.

68. XWDS 14.152; HR 141; JWDS 35.491; ZZTJ 275.8979.

69. JWDS 35.491; ZZTJ 275.8979; CFYG 39.418.

70. *Beimeng suoyan* 18.332; ZZTJ 275.8977–79.

learn of their slayings nearly one month later, news of which left him “utterly heart-broken.” He rebuked Chonghui in the presence of other aides, although their demise clearly served his interests. One surviving brother of Zhuangzong, Cunmei, had long been an invalid at Jinyang after a bout with pneumonia and died apparently of natural causes. The fate of the very youngest brother of the deceased emperor is unknown, although rumors of flight to the distant south appear far-fetched.⁷¹

Empress Liu, Zhuangzong’s widow, who had sought refuge in Jinyang with a prominent brother-in-law, was slain at the orders of Siyuan—the one death during the transition for which the interim regent accepted full responsibility. She was indeed guilty of real crimes such as the hoarding of public funds to the detriment of her husband’s administration, but her detractors focused on an alleged affair with Zhuangzong’s younger brother, Li Cunwo, during their flight to Jinyang, charges difficult to prove.⁷² In Shatuo culture, as in Chinese society, marital infidelity was a serious matter, although generally it did not rise to a capital offense.⁷³ In reality, she and Siyuan had been bitter enemies for many years, and she had often fueled the frictions between her husband and her brother-in-law. She was a humble woman who shared the former emperor’s passion for music and theater, a contributing factor to his isolation from the outer court. After liquidating the former empress and securing Jinyang, the Interim Regent appointed Fu Yanchao, an old intimate, as governor of the city to secure his personal grip on the area.⁷⁴ As for the many consorts of Zhuangzong, some were resettled in Jinyang or released to their own families, although some, like Consort Xia, faced arranged marriages years later to favorites of the new court.⁷⁵

The interim government faced other uncertainties at the ancestral home of Hedong. The “northern capital” of Jinyang continued to be defended on behalf of the former monarch by ardently loyal Fu Yanchao (also known as Li Yanchao), whom the previous administration had dispatched to nearby Binzhou to scrutinize the actions of its prefect, Zhang Xian, due to a history of cordial ties to Siyuan.⁷⁶ The prefect’s family had received generous treatment as captives of insurgents at Weizhou, Xian’s ancestral home, but he refused to surrender to the new government, despite special outreach. Local leaders at Jinyang also faced pressure from two eunuchs from Luoyang still loyal to Zhuangzong, one surnamed Lü and the other Zheng, men serving as inspectors for the city’s treasury and armed forces. The eunuchs were in league with imperial brother Li Cunwo and possessed a forged edict mandating the execution of the city’s civilian administrators, Zhang Xian and Fu Yanchao, intent on seizing control of the city. The two administrators uncovered the plot and were preparing a response when the city

71. XWDS 14.150–51; ZZTJ 275.8976–79.

72. ZZTJ 275.8979; XWDS 14.146; *Beimeng suoyan* 18.333; ZZTJ 275.8979.

73. Chen Jiahua, *Zhongguo lidai minzu shi*, p. 172.

74. CFYG 78.848; ZZTJ 275.8978–79.

75. XWDS 14.146–47.

76. ZZTJ 275.8977–78; JWDS 69.913–14; XWDS 28.313.

succumbed to a mutiny by the armed forces, reflecting a third interest group. In the ensuing melee, Xian was forced to flee Jinyang, but Yanchao succeeded in restoring order with assistance from the capital. Later in the fourth month, Xian died by suicide at Jinyang apparently on orders from the capital, which faulted him for abandoning a city under his charge.

Zhuangzong had four young sons who perished sometime after him, although under unknown circumstances.⁷⁷ They presumably fled with Empress Liu to Jinyang, dying either en route to the city or during the tumult that ensued between local civil and military officials. Zhuangzong's eldest son and presumptive heir, Li Jiji, had received news of his father's death in the western suburbs of Changan, as he returned from the half-year campaign against Shu. The invasion had proceeded perfectly at the outset, only for the invaders to turn against each other. In the tenth month of 925, pacification armies from the north had penetrated the border with Shu and met scant resistance. At Chengdu, capital of the Shu kingdom, they caught the local potentate, Wang Yan, unprepared for an organized defense. By the eleventh month, Chengdu had surrendered without a fight.⁷⁸ The conclusion of a campaign against Shu in two short months, without much bloodletting and without much damage to the region's prosperous towns and cities, had surpassed all expectations. The ruler of Shu was taken into custody, with the government promising clemency. And the vast wealth of Chengdu and its sprawling suburbs, amassed over the centuries through silk and textile production, was safely secured by Later Tang armies for conveyance to the north. The campaign had unfolded flawlessly due to the genius of Guo Chongtao.

But the prodigious wealth of Shu also triggered conflicts of escalating intensity for the victors. Eunuchs long opposed to Guo Chongtao's intrusive oversight over the palace launched a secret campaign against him during his absence from Luoyang, insinuating sinister motives.⁷⁹ The lucre that Shu royals had lavished upon Chongtao in order to protect their own lives and fortunes created plenty of suspicion, especially within the military elite.⁸⁰ The local military leadership also began pleading to retain Chongtao as governor of Shu, professing his "indispensability" to the region, pleas that more cynical observers believed had been orchestrated by him to justify a permanent stay. The Prince of Wei, Jiji, confronted Chongtao about the allegations, which he denied emphatically, but the rumors made their way back to Luoyang all the same through the correspondence of the prince and his attendants, making Chongtao an enemy of the state.⁸¹ In this way, the bloodless invasion of Shu turned homicidal as the occupation unfolded in the winter of 925 to 926.⁸²

77. ZZTJ 275.8979.

78. JWDS 33.459–61, 74.968; ZZTJ 274.8944.

79. XWDS 24.250; ZZTJ 274.8951–52.

80. JWDS 57.769–70; XWDS 63.793; ZZTJ 274.8945, 8948.

81. XWDS 14.153–54; ZZTJ 274.8948.

82. Dudbridge, *A Portrait of Five Dynasties China*, pp. 66–68.

The unraveling began with the execution of Wang Zongbi, the adopted younger brother of the deposed ruler of Shu, at the hand of Guo Chongtao on charges of “excessive parsimony in tendering funds to subsidize occupation armies.” He had presumably either concealed wealth from the occupation forces or dickered in dispensing it.⁸³ Before long, Jiji presided over another high-profile execution, that of a eunuch governor under the Shu regime, Wang Chengxiu, whom he accused of fleeing his command on the heels of the Later Tang invasion, leading thousands of soldiers through the wastelands of Tibet at the peak of winter, and causing countless casualties.⁸⁴ The death of Military Commissioner Guo Chongtao followed soon thereafter, Jiji acting on orders from his mother, Empress Liu.⁸⁵ And in the wake of a flurry of mandates from a paranoid palace in Luoyang, the extended family of the deceased Chongtao and associates like Zhu Youqian perished as well. The next bloodbath affected the royal family of Shu, which had surrendered with promises of clemency. Instead, Shu royals were slain without cause during passage through the western capital of Changan, an action presided over by Jiji and executed by the eunuch Xiang Yansi, sometime during the third month.⁸⁶ Sadly, Jiji was too young to appreciate the ramifications of his actions.

The deaths of Shu royals preceded the regicide against Zhuangzong by several weeks. Sometime between these two events, the Prince of Wei, Jiji, left Changan en route to Luoyang, assisted by Ren Huan, his civilian advisor for the campaign. His father had summoned him doubtless in the hope of redeploying his armies against the rising insurgency in the interior.⁸⁷ But their entourage was intercepted by Zhang Jian, the interim regent for the western capital, who ripped away a suspension bridge that separated Jiji from his bodyguard. As conditions deteriorated, an intimate of the young prince, Lü Zhirou, absconded in fear, likely joined by countless others. The young prince subsequently implored a bodyguard to kill him in an act of mercy, perishing a half-month after his father and a week after his mother.⁸⁸ The interim custodian of the western capital, Zhang Jian, had a reputation for unruly conduct and intercepted convoys from Shu mostly for reasons of greed, but the political consequences of his actions were incalculable. The passing of Jiji left Zhuangzong without a male heir at roughly the same time that his brothers had expired en masse. Events were suddenly favoring Siyuan’s accession.

The *Old History*, a source generally favorable toward Mingzong’s rule, portrays him as disinterested in acceding as emperor, and for twenty days Siyuan persistently

83. ZZTJ 274.8948; XWDS 24.250, 63.794.

84. JWDS 33.459; XWDS 63.792; ZZTJ 273.8926, 8941; 274.8948–49. For details on the demise of Wang Chengxiu by a contemporary, Wang Renyu, see Dudbridge, *A Portrait of Five Dynasties China*, pp. 127–42.

85. JWDS 34.468; XWDS 24.250–51; ZZTJ 274.8954–56.

86. JWDS 90.1182; XWDS 63.794; ZZTJ 274.8970–71, 275.8977.

87. Dudbridge, *A Portrait of Five Dynasties China*, p. 54.

88. JWDS 73.959, 90.1183; XWDS 14.154, 47.522; ZZTJ 275.8981.

brushed aside petitions from Doulu Ge and others to formalize powers as monarch. However, the same source alludes to an agreement, already reached with court insiders by the sixth day, to act on their petitions in due course.⁸⁹ The delay permitted further clarification of conditions in the west and the status of Jiji, until recently at large and presumed alive. On the twenty-sixth day of the fourth month (926.04.26), the civilian overseer for the Shu expedition, Ren Huan, would reach Luoyang with 26,000 residuals, nearly one-third the size of the force that had left the capital in the autumn. A sizable number remained in Shu to provide security for the new governors while others may have absconded. Siyuan reportedly “extended the visit to console him, then inquired of Jiji with Huan giving a full account of his demise.” He had parted with the youth mere days before his suicide and learned of his death through associates. The story implies that Siyuan remained uninformed of the details surrounding Jiji’s death, which in turn infers no direct involvement in the rapid turn of events in the western capital.⁹⁰

The installation of An Chonghui as commissioner of military affairs at the outset of Siyuan’s regency, signaled his early consolidation of political power. His presence allowed Siyuan to run the country without assuming the title of emperor. Another trusted lieutenant of Siyuan, Fan Yanguang, in his capacity as commissioner of palace services, controlled the security apparatus in the capital, an equally important source of power for the interim regent. A third ally in the capital’s new military lineup was the deputy commissioner for palace services, Zhang Yanlang, whose daughter was married to Chonghui’s son.⁹¹ Reflecting his increased sense of control over the government, Siyuan officiated over his first audience with officials on the eighth day of the fourth month (926.04.08), choosing the normal venue for reigning monarchs.

Another sign of administrative housekeeping was the purge of hundreds of eunuchs in and away from the capital, the interim regent targeting eunuchs guilty of political crimes for summary execution, retiring others, and drastically curtailing their future numbers and political functions. The most reviled castrates under the previous reign had poisoned relations between the court and local leaders through rumor and innuendo. The slaying of over seventy eunuchs who had fled Luoyang for Jinyang “left the courtyard drenched in blood,” eyewitnesses report.⁹² A sweeping liquidation of eunuchs had occurred nearly two decades earlier under the Liang dynasty, causing many in the capital to flee to the locales, but the violence appears more targeted in this case.⁹³ The interim regent also abolished the post of “military inspector” (*jianjunshi*), the most substantial post held by eunuch aides away from court. Inspectors began in the ninth

89. JWDS 35.490–91; ZZTJ 275.8976–78.

90. For a detailed account of the demise of Jiji by a contemporary, Wang Renyu, see Dudbridge, *A Portrait of Five Dynasties China*, pp. 54–55.

91. ZZTJ 275.8978, 275.8981.

92. JWDS 36.497; XWDS 38.408.

93. XWDS 38.403.

century a check on the autonomy of military men in the provinces, but they frequently aggravated relations between the capital and the circuits. Apart from uprooting an unpopular legacy of his brother's reign, Siyuan strategically eliminated a potential source of resistance to him.⁹⁴ He used the occasion to retire the palace's senior castrate, Zhang Juhan. In reality, Juhan's record had been irreproachable: a month earlier he had saved the lives of thousands by modifying an imperial mandate pertaining to the liquidation of Shu expatriates, limiting death to the royal family.⁹⁵ But his dismissal related less to the particulars of his record than the issue of eunuch power that he personified.

Siyuan discovered soon after assuming powers as regent that the six palaces in Luoyang contained well over a thousand women, including hundreds of young girls who attended palace ladies. The numbers were defended by senior eunuchs as "consistent with Tang practice." Siyuan nonetheless insisted on first releasing recently recruited younger women, keeping only earlier recruits, presumably women beyond marriageable age. He also ordered the release of a sizable number of harem recruits en route to the capital from Sichuan, many taken from the palaces of the Shu kings.⁹⁶ The interim government set an upper limit of one hundred for its staff of palace attendants and entertainers, a fraction of their former size. The imperial kitchens were capped at fifty while hunting assistants were capped at twenty.⁹⁷ The sudden cuts in palace support staff were clearly intended to set a new tone of temperance in the future. Only one group survived the budget cuts, fortune-tellers like Ma Chongji, a "northern barbarian" from Jinyang whose predictions were legendary.⁹⁸ Siyuan's high regard for face-readers and spiritualists began well before the reign and never waned, despite official resistance.

For the interim regent, few symbols were as loathed as Yuan Xingqin, the man responsible for the death of his eldest son, Li Congjing, a slaying not sanctioned by the court. Xingqin had been apprehended to the west of Luoyang, his feet lopped off before conveyance to the capital. Ironically, it was Siyuan who had defeated Xingqin in hand-to-hand combat at Yan and adopted him as son, only for the two men to end up a decade later on opposite sides of the political divide. Siyuan excoriated Xingqin upon meeting him on the twelfth day of the fourth month (926.04.12): "My son was slain at your hands. What offense did he commit against you?" Xingqin responded with an indictment of his own, eyes fixed squarely on the interim regent: "And what was the Former Monarch's offense against you?"⁹⁹ The warriors around Siyuan had a higher appreciation of the tragedy behind Xingqin's epic life and death, causing his decapitation at the marketplace "to reduce onlookers to tears." Siyuan respected

94. XWDS 38.408; JWDS 72.954; ZZTJ 275.8983, 8985.

95. XWDS 38.406.

96. CFYG 42.459; ZZTJ 275.8978.

97. CFYG 56.593.

98. XWDS 57.664; Chen Jiahua, *Zhongguo lidai minzushi*, p. 171.

99. ZZTJ 275.8980; XWDS 25.272.

warriors who acted on ethical dictates, as seen in his clemency for Hou Yi, but he was first and foremost a father for whom retribution for the unjust death of his son was a moral imperative.

On the same day that the interim regent beheaded Yuan Xingqin, the twelfth day of the fourth month (926.04.12), he appointed several intimates to strategic positions to the west of the capital, Shi Jingtang at Shaanzhou, Wang Sitong (d. 934) at Tongzhou, and adopted son Li Congke at Hezhong. The administration was concerned about possible resistance from armies returning from the Shu campaign, a force under thirty thousand; instability was avoided partly by spreading lieutenants of proven loyalty across the region.¹⁰⁰ Siyuan also announced an institutional change of some historical consequence by restoring powers of taxation to the Department of State Affairs (*Shangshusheng*) by eliminating the post of Revenues Commissioner.¹⁰¹ Since the mid-Tang, revenues commissioners (*zuyongshi*) had been introduced to monitor taxes on rents and commodities at the local level. By the Five Dynasties, they had come to play a leading role in the logistics of war by providing armies with food and equipment, which allowed the office to come under the purview of military men. In this way, an important aspect of the empire's finances was controlled by a commissioner with powers independent of the Department of State Affairs, which fell under the purview of chief councilors. But the absence of oversight by civil servants inevitably created opportunities for corruption and cronyism that undermined the stability of the state in the long term by alienating the populace.

The most hated revenues commissioner, Kong Qian, an intimate of Zhuangzong, was accused of acting on behalf of a government more concerned with generating revenues than protecting society from abuses. Siyuan reviled Qian as "an ulcer on the people," adding "his plunders and encroachments have thousands of manifestations, his depravity and deception have induced a hundred changes."¹⁰² Qian was especially unpopular with regional governors, who resented his intrusion into their finances. And as a former governor, Siyuan doubtless had personal experience in dealing with the officious commissioner and his lackeys.¹⁰³ He thus presided over summary execution for Qian, while his rapacious tax policies were repealed and the illicit wealth acquired by his family confiscated by the state. An assortment of cronies were cashiered as well. In addition, the Revenues Commission was eventually eliminated, initially placed under the direct control of chief councilors and later under a separate Fiscal Commission (*sansi*).¹⁰⁴

As part of the fiscal reforms introduced by the interim regent, "households devoted to raising pigs and goats or producing firewood and charcoal are hereby set

100. ZZTJ 275.8980.

101. ZZTJ 275.8980; JWDS 35.492, 36.496.

102. JWDS 35.492; CFYG 160.1783; *Beimeng suoyan* 18.334.

103. Wang Gungwu, *The Structure of Power in North China*, pp. 139–40.

104. For details, see Chap. 5.

free.”¹⁰⁵ Based on the above citation from the dynastic history, it would appear that certain households raised domestic animals or produced charcoal for the Revenues Commission under terms of hereditary service, likely to meet the demands of the palace or local administrators. The practice may well have been extended to the circuits, prompting the administration to intervene early on.¹⁰⁶ Such important changes in fiscal affairs by the Interim Regent boded well for meaningful progress on an even wider range of matters in years to come.

Halfway into his regency, on the fifteenth day of the fourth month (926.04.15), Siyuan purged two military figures who seemed symptomatic of the failed policies of his predecessor, Duan Ning and Wen Tao.¹⁰⁷ Ning had converted from the Liang dynasty in 923, surrendering an army of fifty thousand to accelerate the final conquest of Tang armies, causing Zhuangzong to adopt the older man as son. Ning quickly acquired ignominy for patronizing actors and other friends of the influential Empress Liu. Allegations of abuses of office as regional governor also abounded, including siphoning from the state treasury to cover personal expenses. Wen Tao had a hand in plundering the Tang imperial tombs of Changan as well, a sacrilege to the memory of the current government’s ancestors. The interim regent ordered arrests for both men while stripping them of their adopted names; they died two years later. Sources attribute the recommendation to Huo Yanwei, a one-time senior commander in Liang times, who impugned the official records of Ning and Tao during the previous dynasty. The commander eventually prevailed at court over Military Commissioner An Chonghui, who hesitated to penalize crimes of a political nature committed under the bogus Liang regime. By taking a balanced approach that focused on the worst of the recent excesses for the two men, the interim regent could avoid the appearance of prosecuting a vendetta against the associates of his dead brother.

On the political front, Siyuan quietly engaged several esteemed voices in the military, including Huo Yanwei and Kong Xun, about the potential paths to his accession as monarch, a discussion that later spread to civilian circles. Sources attribute the meeting to the sixteenth day of the fourth month (926.04.16), although deliberations likely began much earlier.¹⁰⁸ The majority of military figures led by Yanwei and Xun concurred that a new dynastic designation was appropriate and necessary. As former subjects of the Liang dynasty, both men addressed the succession matter as outsiders divorced from early Shatuo history. A prominent cluster of civilian aides, in contrast, preferred to retain the current dynastic name. They pointed to the political conditions that inspired Zhuangzong to adopt the Tang namesake, namely, the epic rivalry between the Liang and Jin that turned two generations of Shatuo princes into faith-

105. JWDS 35.492.

106. XWDS 26.281.

107. ZJTJ 275.8982; XWDS 40.441, 45.497–98, 47.522.

108. ZJTJ 275.8982–83; XWDS 54.617; CFYG 3.35, 11.113; *Beimeng suoyan* 18.331. The above passage conflates texts from multiple sources.

ful guardians of a larger Tang legacy. By forsaking the old namesake, Siyuan would be slighting the historical contribution of Keyong and Cunxu to restoring Tang rule, which came at enormous cost in lives and resources. The civilian courtiers focused on history and tradition in addressing the matter, while sentimentally invoking the memory of Keyong.

Siyuan personally preferred continuity in the succession and regarded himself as a legitimate alternative, arguing that adopted boys raised since childhood by Jin royals scarcely differed from biological sons.¹⁰⁹ He further reminded courtiers of his unparalleled role in laying the foundation of dynasty,

I served the dynasty's founder (Guochang) since I was thirteen: he regarded me as kin and treated me like offspring. I served the Martial Emperor (Keyong) for thirty years and the Former Monarch (Cunxu) for twenty years, never sitting out a single battle. I laid the foundation for the Martial Emperor's dynastic enterprise. And the unification of the world by the Former Emperor actually came about through my personal involvement. What need is there for different dynasties in the case of men from the same family? . . . My succession to Zhuangzong will be comparable to a younger brother succeeding an older brother.

Siyuan saw himself as no mercenary soldier, like most of Keyong's surrogate sons, but one of the dynasty's co-founders. Sensing his resolve on the matter, Minister of Personnel Li Qi moved the discussion in a direction favorable to the interim regent's own position: "If you change the dynastic name, then you are treating the Former Monarch like a stranger. . . . Under previous dynasties there were many occasions where peripheral kinsmen inherited the throne."¹¹⁰ In other words, changing the dynastic designation would be an act of filial infidelity.

Li Qi cited the precedent of fraternal successions for three emperors in the preceding Tang: Ruizong (r. 710–712), Wenzong (r. 827–840), and Wuzong (r. 840–846). Fraternal succession had plenty of precedent in imperial China, but it was disfavored due to the potential for conflict in the next generation between the progeny of the dying ruler and those of his predecessor. In the end, Siyuan acted on his own instincts. The potential for power struggles between future successors did not apply to his case, as Zhuangzong had no male survivors. In this way, the dynastic name remained unchanged, while the protocol for "successor sons" was employed for the accession ceremony, consistent with the Chinese convention.

Siyuan proceeded to the Western Palace on the twentieth day of the fourth month (926.04.20) to kneel before the coffin of Zhuangzong, occupying the place of honor normally reserved for children of the deceased. He immediately acceded to the throne as the second emperor of Later Tang with the temple name of Mingzong.¹¹¹ By assuming

109. Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, p. 150.

110. CFYG 57.602; JWDS 35.491.

111. ZZTJ 275.8983; JWDS 36.495.

the position of son at the imperial bier, Siyuan reinforced the fiction of a conventional father-to-son succession, a spectacle made even more bizarre by the fact that the new monarch was a generation older than the deceased. A sea of officials donning colorless mourning garb soon joined him in bowing before the coffin of Zhuangzong to render their respects. They subsequently reappeared in more colorful "auspicious garb" to render felicitations for the accession. Officials in mourning garb repeated a different ritual at the Western Palace a day later to honor the deceased monarch. In the same spirit of solemn humility, the new Son of Heaven issued a mandate two days after the accession that tried to dissuade officials across the country from forwarding the sorts of auspicious animals and objects that commonly make their way to the capital on such occasions, including hunting dogs, most likely due to the unfortunate circumstances surrounding his enthronement.¹¹²

Another mandate issued at the time related to celebratory accession gifts from prefects and lesser local officials, which the court now discouraged, citing the need "to avoid overly taxing the common people." Interestingly, the court insisted on an exception to the waiver for regional governors, who were expected to follow previous conventions. The palace also mandated that the new rules for accession gifts would apply in the future to other major holidays on the imperial calendar, including the lunar New Year, the Winter Solstice, the Dragon Boat Festival, and the emperor's birthday.¹¹³ The waivers represented a clever play for goodwill among mid-level officials in the locales, but they also signaled the new monarch's sensitivity to the plight of commoners, who ultimately paid for these gifts through direct taxes or indirect assessments. In reality, donations from the governors on imperial holidays were a form of taxation that served to diminish their power by siphoning wealth upward. The holiday gifts also provided an occasion for regional governors to demonstrate their fealty and emperors to measure it in tangible ways, so the administration could never abandon the practice entirely.

Siyuan subsequently received petitions from a broad sector of the official elite to set aside mourning obligations and resume the business of governing on a full-time basis. The entreaties were a part of the standard protocol for such occasions, as officials were expected to press for emperors in mourning to resume their political duties, while monarchs were expected to resist out of filial devotion. The emperor dickered for several days before finally consenting. The audience on the twenty-fifth day of the fourth month (926.04.25) was Mingzong's first formal audience since assuming powers, a venue selected with an eye to decorum: the Zhongxing Palace was among the least regal venues in the imperial compound.¹¹⁴ The process of transferring power to a new administration was only complete when Mingzong appeared at the Wenming Palace on the twenty-eighth day (926.04.28), among the grandest of venues, to face south

112. ZZTJ 275.8983.

113. ZZTJ 275.8983–84.

114. JWDS 36.495.

as he declared a general amnesty and the inauguration of the reign name Tiancheng, “Heaven’s Fulfillment,” to take effect immediately. His regency of less than a month had proven highly productive in terms of completing the necessary housekeeping in steady increments before launching a wider program of reform.

As noted by historians of other periods in Chinese history, the protocol whereby the Son of Heaven faces south to receive the obeisance of officials during the imperial accession was central to legitimizing the institution of monarchy, allowing the emperor to bask in the adulation of his subjects.¹¹⁵ Over the course of his reign, Mingzong would frequently return to the esteemed Wenming and Mingtang Palaces to conduct business, even though by all indications, he cared little for the pomp and ceremony associated with formal audience. But he acquired a quick appreciation of the political utility of this and other rituals and adjusted his personal style to accommodate convention. Precisely due to his deft use of political symbolism, it seems odd that Mingzong chose to change the reign name immediately, creating in effect two reign names for the year 926, the fourth year of Tongguang for the initial four months and the first year of Tiancheng for the last eight months.¹¹⁶ Historically, many monarchs waited until the next year to change the reign name, but such delays usually emanated from a desire to honor the legacy of one’s predecessor and the prevailing sentiment for Zhuangzong’s reign was preeminently negative. Under similar conditions, Taizong of early Tang had done the same in adopting the reign name Zhenguan during the ninth year of the Wude reign of his father, creating two reign names for the year 627. Acting on that particular precedent, however, was a reminder of Mingzong’s own illicit path to power.

The interim regent’s transition to Son of Heaven was now complete. In the process, Siyuan became the first emperor in the Five Dynasties of North China whose power base derived from the professional military, not provincial governorships.¹¹⁷ The Liang founder Zhu Wen and the Later Tang founder Li Keyong both began as governors who challenged the state from the outside. The same can be said of the original seven kingdoms of South China, regimes founded by regional governors. But subsequent dynasties in North China—the Later Jin, Han, and Zhou—were founded by professionals who spent their formative years in the Palace Guard, men whose base of operations and networks orbited around the capital. The phenomenon may well represent the beginning of a process whereby military power had become increasingly centralized, as some scholars argue. Alternately, it may simply reflect the fact that the best martial talent had come to be concentrated in the metropolitan armies through aggressive recruitment that began in the Liang dynasty and continued under subsequent regimes. Mingzong was the iconic military professional. But could the celebrated warrior salvage the battered image of the Shatuo as imperial caretakers in the wake of Zhuangzong’s aborted reign? Only time would tell.

115. Rawski, *The Last Emperors*, p. 205.

116. XWDS 6.55.

117. Zhang Qifan, *Wudai jinjun*, p. 87.

Chapter 3

Political Events: The Tiancheng Reign, 926–930

In the long history of China, only a handful of men to accede illicitly as sovereigns were visionary enough to set aside their own insecurities and rise to greatness. The most memorable case is Tang Taizong. He orchestrated the mutiny in 626 that led to the death of his elder brother, then deposed his own father, the sixty-year-old Li Yuan, placing him under house arrest until his death nine years later.¹ Taizong employed every excuse to justify his misdeeds—the declining faculties of the father and the intrigues of his brother. Nonetheless, in a society organized around family values, Taizong's actions were egregious violations of filial and fraternal duty, the twin pillars of Confucian morality. The urge to atone for failings in his private life created a drive to surpass his father in the realm of governing, which Taizong achieved partly through an ambitious agenda of territorial expansion and partly by forging legendary relations with officials.

Taizong also acquired an almost fanatical obsession with historical writings and presided over the production of a massive corpus of dynastic histories, using the past as a mirror on the present. He proved equally obsessed with the representation of his own reign and of contemporary history, and assembled everything from daily records to national histories with the intent of forging a positive image of his times. Previous dynasties tended to leave to posterity the task of scrutinizing documents and finalizing judgments, but Taizong's historical imprint was much larger, making it virtually impossible to separate the man from the myth.² In the manner of a modern politician, the emperor appreciated the political utility of public image. From the outset, he adopted the reign name “Authentic Vision,” *Zhenguan*, a designation retained for the duration of the reign, to convey his ambition to rule with an eye for the long term. Taizong's passionate tête-à-tête with leading advisors like Wei Zheng, published a half century after his death in the form of *Zhenguan zhengyao*, immortalized him as the Sage King for China's middle period.³ The high esteem in which he continued to be held in the Five Dynasties, three centuries later, speaks to the effectiveness of Taizong's public relations machine.

1. *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 3, pp. 182–93.

2. Twitchett, *The Writing of Official History under the T'ang*, pp. 119–87.

3. *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 3, pp. 240–41.

Exactly three hundred years later, Emperor Mingzong of the Later Tang would borrow heavily from the playbook of Taizong. He too had much for which to atone due to the unseemly spew of violence at the outset of his reign. He too would employ the vast resources of the state to cast his predecessor in a negative light, while burnishing an image of sagely wisdom for himself. He too committed the court to compiling a history of Shatuo rule in China extending back several generations, texts that survived into the Song dynasty to provide the foundation for the dynastic histories. Mingzong also mimicked Taizong in seeking to win the hearts of his people through a bold political agenda, especially in the critical first year in power.

Mingzong initially moved cautiously to realign court personnel, allowing the civil service leadership to retain some measure of continuity: senior statesmen Doulu Ge and Wei Yue (d. 927) retained powers as chief councilors through the fifth month of 926.⁴ Both men, despite heralded pedigrees, were notorious for their deficiencies in scholarship as well as practical skills, but Ge was among the first senior statesmen to endorse Siyuan's elevation to interim regent and later his accession to the throne. Mingzong may have owed something to the pair of councilors for lending early support, but more likely, he worried that an immediate sacking would create insecurities among a wider group of civilian aides whose services were needed.

Sensitive to complaints that his predecessor had been either too miserly or too manipulative in rewarding the armed forces, Mingzong initially chose to err on the side of indulgence. The soft policy of dispensing bounty did not necessarily compromise the hard policy of imposing discipline upon the rank-and-file. The two imperatives proceeded simultaneously. The "Basic Annals" reports that the administration reassigned over twenty men to leadership positions in the circuits, mostly at the level of military governor during the all-important first month in power.⁵ Actions of this sort, as part of a policy of reducing hereditary power in the armed forces that had originated in the Liang dynasty and continued in spirit under his predecessor, would remain for some years as part of the routine of managing military power, although later rotations rarely occurred on such a scale. The emperor sought to strike a balance between passive oversight and aggressive intervention.

While initially retaining Doulu Ge and Wei Yue as ceremonial councilors, Mingzong immediately elevated two other men to the council, Ren Huan and Zheng Jue (d. 930), individuals better aligned to his own priorities. The former minister of works, Huan was conferred councilor powers and oversight over fiscal affairs on the second day of the fifth month (926.05.02).⁶ He personified a small but influential cluster of civilian leaders with impressive credentials in military affairs, having only recently returned from the Shu campaign in the southwest. A man with a streak of stubborn

4. JWDS 36.496; XWDS 28.301-03; ZZTJ 275.8976.

5. JWDS 36.496-99.

6. JWDS 36.496.

independence, Huan could be expected to keep the cronies from the previous reign in check until Mingzong could recruit individuals better suited to his own ideals.⁷ Huan's complement as chief councilor was Zheng Jue, the grandson of a councilor in the waning Tang. Jue had risen to Hanlin academician during the Liang dynasty, and then advisor to the heir-apparent under Zhuangzong; these were important offices that kept him in the public eye for over a decade.⁸ The court's military commissioners, An Chonghui and Kong Xun, had rallied for the elevation of Jue, regarding Huan as short on experience. At a personal level, the political savvy reflected in Jue's "measured use of words" and cautious demeanor would offer a welcome contrast with Huan's brutal honesty. The two men were a lesson in contrasts. But sadly, Jue's advanced age left him less effective as counterweight, which empowered Huan in ways that worked to his own detriment in the end.

Mingzong banqueted a combination of civil and military officials in the Changchun Palace on the nineteenth day of the fifth month (926.05.19), the first state banquet on record for the reign. The event must have been a high priority for the palace, in light of its early appearance on the imperial calendar. During the three years of his predecessor's rule, participants at such events were principally, if not exclusively, military men. The intentional inclusion of civilian officials signaled Siyuan's desire for a wider involvement of civilians in the social life of the capital. It is noteworthy that a similar group, a mixture of civil and military officials, was summoned to the palace several months later for a banquet marking the end of public mourning for Zhuangzong.⁹ A pattern appears to have emerged early on that involved a broader franchise for civilians.

The emperor's attention must have turned to burial preparations for his predecessor in the last days of summer. He had earlier rendered rites at the bier of Zhuangzong in the Western Palace and likely revisited the chamber several times over the course of the next three months, as Zhuangzong's body lay in state.¹⁰ The construction of the mausoleum in the suburbs of Luoyang, near the burial site of Zhuangzong's beloved mother, who died exactly one year earlier, likely placed an extra strain on the coffers of the current administration; monarchs of the Five Dynasties rarely built tombs before their deaths, in part because many perished before their time. On the day of Zhuangzong's final interment, the twenty-first day of the seventh month (926.07.21), Mingzong tapped Chief Councilors Doulu Ge and Wei Yue to preside over final interment at the suburban mausoleum as masters of ceremonies. He personally followed the coffin to the city gate, but refused to proceed to the gravesite in customary fashion for offspring in mourning.¹¹ Funeral rites included libations by the Son of Heaven to the accompaniment of the music originating with Kings Wu and Cheng, the martial

7. XWDS 28.305–07; Wang Gungwu, *The Structure of Power in North China*, pp. 151, 158.

8. XWDS 54.619–20.

9. CFYG 111.1207.

10. JWDS 36.496.

11. JWDS 36.502; ZZTJ 275.8990.

founders of the Zhou dynasty two millennia ago. The final privilege involved the placement of a tablet for him in the ancestral temple. In this way, the burial rites and other posthumous honors afforded Zhuangzong were consistent with imperial standards.¹²

By the end of the seventh month, the administration made a needed adjustment in civilian leadership by dismissing Doulu Ge and Wei Yue, the holdover councilors from the previous reign.¹³ The court had originally assigned the farcical pair to preside over Zhuangzong's state funeral, a duty generally followed by deployment elsewhere as an act of deference to the deceased. The two men instead proceeded to court presumably to resume their original duties, rather than wait for the reassignment decree. They were intercepted by Military Commissioner An Chonghui, who roundly reviled them: "You are nominally still Masters of Ceremonies, yet you appear at court without waiting for an assignment, doubtless thinking that a military man like myself might be gullible to your guile!"¹⁴ The commissioner's response reveals his special sensitivity as someone new to the protocols of the capital, although he must have been apprised of the rules by civilian aides.

After the former councilors had violated this minor funeral protocol, their enemies, led by Censor Xiao Xifu, delivered a more comprehensive set of accusations of abuses of power with long histories: he accused Doulu Ge of systemic graft and collusion in a murder case and Wei Yue of selling office to examination candidates and appropriating the valuables of neighbors. Other allegations included "insatiable appetite for dirty dealings."¹⁵ Few of the charges rose to high crimes, but An Chonghui took the lead in forcing an early exit for Ge and Yue, easily swaying the emperor while ignoring input from the new chief councilor, Ren Huan, who noted the administration's political debt to the pair as early supporters. The former councilors would commit suicide at their places of exile a year later—the first political casualties of the reign.¹⁶

Mingzong paid two visits to the Lengquan monastery in the late summer of 926 to inspect farming, combining work with pleasure.¹⁷ He also made his first trip to the Zhide Palace, the estate of the recently deceased governor of Luoyang, Zhang Quanyi. The location of the compound in nearby suburbs would allow Mingzong to frequent the spot in coming years, often visiting friends and scenic sites en route.¹⁸ Soon, he was celebrating his first birthday as emperor.

Born in 867, the ninth day of the ninth month (867.09.09), Mingzong turned sixty *sui* in 926. In China, sixty represents the completion of the sexagesimal cycle for numbering the years, after which death comes as the natural end of life rather than an

12. JWDS 37.507.

13. JWDS 36.502–03; ZZTJ 275.8990–91.

14. XWDS 28.301–02.

15. JWDS 36.502.

16. JWDS 38.525.

17. CFYG 114.1245.

18. JWDS 37.510.

untimely interruption. The multitude of officials invited the emperor to a vegetarian banquet at the Jing'ai Buddhist Temple in celebration. And the palace reciprocated by inviting a mixture of Buddhist and Daoist clerics to the Zhongxing Palace for lectures on assorted religious themes, consistent with recent practice.¹⁹ Officials no doubt crafted poems playing on the two numbers in the imperial birthday, nine-nine (a homonym for "long" as in longevity), while military men provided entertainment of the athletic sort. The festivities provided the first occasion for the novice emperor to socialize with a wide array of civil and military officials. Considerable forethought surely went into the decision to mark his birthday with the right calibration of merriment and moral edification. Imperial birthdays were national holidays that allowed people across the country to join in the revelry, as client states to the south and autonomous domains to the north dispatched envoys to tender tribute. Governors across the country sent generous gifts as well, although now the gifts had to come from their own pockets, as mandated some months earlier.

* * *

Mingzong exploited the first audience of the new year of 927 to issue a fascinating proclamation about the nexus between Confucian rites and ethical governance, his comments remarkably philosophical for a man never afforded a classical education. He stated:

Monarchs use ritual propriety in commissioning official subjects and subjects employ loyalty in serving the monarch. A single day cannot pass without ritual propriety just as a single night cannot pass without contemplating loyal duty. The two ideals are complements that allow people above and below to follow their prescribed roles.²⁰

Sources fail to contextualize Mingzong's statement about the complementarity of loyal service and ritual performance. Perhaps it represents a reaction to a cluster of mutinies in his first year in power, which subsided in subsequent years, after this pronouncement. But there was much wisdom in connecting ritual practices, the usual focus of civilian leaders, to loyal conduct, the premier concern of soldiers. Confucian society worked best when men of war knew something about the moral codes embodied in the rites ordering society. And the message promised to reach a broader audience, coming from the lips of the country's commander-in-chief.

Mingzong formally changed his personal name from Siyuan to Dan on the first day of the month (927.01.01), eight months after the accession, making it easier to enforce the empire-wide taboo pertaining to the imperial name, the use of which was

19. JWDS 37.510; CFYG 2.23.

20. CFYG 108.1176.

punishable with death.²¹ Rulers of the Tang and indeed most dynasties employed obscure single-character personal names, another reason for Mingzong to drop the two common characters in his personal name. But the timing of the announcement is somewhat curious. Such an important matter is usually addressed in the early days of a reign and sources fail to divulge the reason for the delay. Mingzong also had a Shatuo name by birth, Miaojiilie, which had been changed to Siyuan after his adoption by Li Keyong. As commander, Siyuan had once killed a man for uttering his original name, Miaojiilie, but now the characters in Siyuan and Miaojiilie reverted to daily use.²²

The administration tapped Cui Xie, a military man, to join the ranks of councilors on the eleventh day of the first month (927.01.11), a group led by Feng Dao and Ren Huan. As a rule, decision-making among chief councilors tended to be rather democratic, in terms of the input afforded individuals. In contrast, the Military Commission headed by An Chonghui and Kong Xun, contained numerous nominal appointees with ongoing duties in the circuits, which often allowed the senior commissioner to speak with a single voice, unlike his civilian counterpart. The Military Commission would remain for the duration of the reign the exclusive preserve of military men, whereas many outsiders managed to rise to ranks of chief councilors. The selection of Cui Xie as chief councilor created some friction between civilian and military leaders, for he was scarcely literate.²³ Councilor Ren preferred the censor Li Qi for the post, but An Chonghui found fault with his excessive materialism. Official integrity had emerged as an important consideration in selecting councilors, as reflected in Mingzong's special praise for Feng Dao as a man "disinterested in competing for material things."²⁴ In conceding to Chonghui, Mingzong affirmed his superior confidence in his military staff. Naming marginally literate warriors to civilian posts was commonplace in the Five Dynasties, but Mingzong had a chance to change this unfortunate practice and failed.

On a more leisurely note, the emperor toured the Sweet Water Pavilion in the early spring of 927. Few trips to this particular site are on record for the reign, presumably due to its distance from the capital. The pavilion's sprawling grounds made it a popular venue for entertaining officials in Liang times. Sources are silent on whether Mingzong invited others to join, although the selection of one of the capital's most spacious sites suggests a sizable entourage.²⁵ During an imperial outing at the Huijie Gardens, chief councilors, military commissioners, and local governors contributed cash and silk from their private stores to defer entertainment costs. "It is an extreme failing in ruler-subject protocol for subjects to entertain their monarch," writes the *Historical Records* in censure, inasmuch as charity should emanate from above and generate downward.²⁶

21. JWDS 38.517.

22. XWDS 32.350.

23. ZZTJ 275.8998–99; CFYG 74.808–09.

24. ZZTJ 275.8999.

25. JWDS 6.95, 38.521.

26. XWDS 6.58; JWDS 38.520, 38.522.

The sharing of food or drink with an emperor was a highly ritualized act under Chinese dynasties, a privilege “bestowed” by one’s sovereign. The relaxation of such protocols seems a distinct feature of the Five Dynasties, partly due to tight budgets and partly due to the unconventional backgrounds of rulers.

Mingzong would socialize with courtiers and friends a total of seventeen times over the course of 927, the first event occurring at the home of Shi Jingtang on the heels of the Lutai suppression.²⁷ Occasionally governors from strategic commands were invited to palace banquets, like the Weizhou governor Zhao Zaili a year later. Banquets declined somewhat in frequency in coming years, but they remained a part of the intermingling of politics and social life for the rest of the reign.²⁸ His predecessor similarly enjoyed visiting the homes of friends as an escape from palace routine, but the only man favored with regular visits was Zhang Quanyi, the hereditary governor of Luoyang, whose estate was now the vacation retreat of Mingzong.²⁹ The social circle of Mingzong was much wider, and he refused to privilege one man with a preponderance of visits. Trips to the homes of Chonghui and Jingtang came a full year into the reign, suggesting somewhat less enthusiasm for the long evenings of food and wine that accompanied such as events. Sources rarely mention the presence of imperial consorts during these forays beyond the palace, so presumably they stayed at home, in contrast with the wife of his predecessor, Empress Liu, who frequently socialized with others beyond the palace. Mingzong had yet to install Consort Cao as empress, so his social life must have been unconventional at the outset.

Mingzong experienced one of his earliest spats with court handlers after attempts to summon Zhou Xuanbao, his favorite fortuneteller, to the capital. The two men had apparently crossed paths years earlier at the Shatuo base at Jinyang, where Xuanbao predicted Siyuan’s destiny to be ruler of men.³⁰ The academician Zhao Feng remonstrated vigorously against the fortuneteller’s relocation to Luoyang in 927, insisting, “Xuanbao once predicted that Your Majesty would become Son of Heaven, which has become a reality today. What more can be said about the matter? . . . Since antiquity, the reckless words of prognosticators have often caused the extinction of entire families. This is hardly the proper course for restoring order to the world.” Zhao Feng’s comments were consistent with the view of many Confucian advisors, who held prognosticators as a class in low esteem, their utterances capable of wreaking considerable tumult, as evidenced recently in the rift between the current emperor and his predecessor. In the end, Mingzong chose to lavish gifts of gold and silk upon Xuanbao, but heeded the counsel of Zhao Feng by rescinding the summons.

27. CFYG 114.1245.

28. CFYG 111.1208.

29. XWDS 14.144–45.

30. ZZTJ 276.9011–12; JWDS 71.946; *Beimeng suoyan* 18.341; ZZTJ 276.9012.

For the duration of his initial eighteen months in power, Mingzong never ventured beyond the suburbs of the capital, so courtiers were rightfully taken aback when he issued an open letter to officials on the eleventh day of the ninth month (927.09.11), two days after his sixty-first birthday, announcing an imperial tour of Kaifeng starting in the subsequent tenth month:

Historically, monarchs periodically conducted inspections and hunts partly in deference to rituals and regulations and partly to scrutinize local conditions. . . . With distinguished officials protecting law and order, conditions across the country are wholesome and harmonious, the people universally delighting in bountiful harvests. The security of our borders rests upon the anticipation of a royal presence. I can hardly afford to ignore the masses, who have called upon me to conduct a local inspection. I have chosen the seventh day of the tenth month for an official visit to Kaifeng.³¹

Curiously, in the first line, Mingzong harkens back to ancient times when feudal kings needed to tour the realm, a royal presence serving to thwart rebellion. But an allusion that appears anachronistic for the halcyon days of high Tang may not have been wholly inappropriate in the context of the Five Dynasties, when empires dissolved in the space of years rather than generations. Reference to the “masses” (*zhong*) demanding a royal presence goes without further elaboration, although historical texts for the period often conflate the masses with the military leadership, which seems the inference in this case.

The choice of Kaifeng for the tour certainly makes strategic sense, in light of the numerous mutinies east of the capital in the past year. Kaifeng was chosen for reasons of proximity, several hundred kilometers to the east of Luoyang, thereby making less disruptive the temporary movement of support staff. Imperial crossings of the Yellow River were far more costly and time-consuming. As for the reasons for an imperial sojourn, targets of opportunity for territorial expansion most immediately come to mind, either to gather intelligence or launch an unexpected raid. Rumors were rife that An Chonghui had pressed for a campaign against Wu to the southeast, a policy persistently rejected by the emperor. But the mixed signals emanating from Luoyang, as seen in contradictions between the deliberative emperor and his hotheaded commissioner, resulted in idle chatter about Wu as the likely target, which in turn unsettled some governors at home.³²

Before departing Luoyang, Mingzong expressed special concern about the usual abuses associated with military actions and thus issued the following marching orders: “You should plunder not a single item nor impress a single man into military service.”³³ The relevant penalties for violators are not mentioned, but the emphatic wording of

31. JWDS 38.527.

32. JWDS 66.873.

33. CFYG 114.1245.

the directive suggests the full weight of martial law for offenders. To secure Luoyang for an extended absence, the emperor named Military Commissioner Kong Xun as interim custodian charged with protecting the sanctity of imperial grounds.³⁴ Xun's daughter was betrothed or soon to be betrothed to Li Conghou, the emperor's second oldest son, a sign of the central role of in-laws in the emperor's security apparatus.

Mingzong left Luoyang as planned on the seventh day of the tenth month (927.10.07), only to receive intelligence two days into the trip that a mutiny had erupted at Kaifeng at the instigation of Zhu Shouyin, who had killed the local military director, Ma Yanchao, to seize control over the city.³⁵ Shouyin is the same man who had surrendered Kaifeng to the insurgent armies of Mingzong a year earlier, forsaking personal bonds with Zhuangzong, and subsequently received as reward the esteemed Xuanwu governorship. The palace had announced the sojourn a month in advance, giving the local governor enough time to react, sensing his own interests threatened by an imperial presence. In the process, he became a traitor two times over.

Upon learning of the mutiny at Kaifeng, Mingzong unleashed a crack force of five hundred Imperial Guardsmen under the command of Fan Yanguang, leader of the Weizhou suppression earlier in the year. He then accelerated his own advance on Kaifeng, accompanied by Shi Jingtang in his capacity as Commissioner for the Imperial Sojourn (*yuyingshi*). Jingtang's cavalry units managed to cover some two hundred *li* of uneven terrain in a single night, a stunning logistical feat at the time. The ensuing battle at the exterior walls of Kaifeng scarcely lasted a day before government forces prevailed, uplifted by the presence of the Son of Heaven in their midst. Shouyin and his family had committed suicide in advance of the city's fall, his mutiny failing for lack of support within the local military establishment. His body was first whipped before his head was taken to the marketplace for its final humiliation. On the eve of rebelling, Shouyin had solicited assistance from Ma Yanchao, the city's military director. Yanchao was cruelly murdered upon spurning the overture. Mingzong later conferred office upon the surviving son of Yanchao to celebrate the loyal devotion of subjects. The palace also proclaimed a generous amnesty for former associates of the disgraced governor, thereby concluding the affair in the spirit of reconciliation. There is no evidence of mass death for family and friends of Shouyin, another act of remarkable restraint under the circumstances.

Almost universally, sources impugn the court's military advisors for the mutiny at Kaifeng by launching a highly publicized imperial progress and couching its mission in terms of domestic security, that is, "scrutinizing local affairs," rather than routine travel. Moreover, the month-long interlude between the announcement and commencement of the trip left time for the rumor mill to feed speculation about ulterior motives and unspoken agendas, which could have been avoided altogether by giving a shorter

34. JWDS 38.527.

35. JWDS 38.527, 74.971–72; XWDS 51.574; ZZTJ 276.9009.

notice. The political dimensions of the imperial progress, in effect, were managed poorly from the outset. Thus, Mingzong and Chonghui must be held responsible for the negative consequences of the action in terms of wasted resources. The only scenario under which the government emerges as irreproachable is if it had acted on intelligence of the impending treachery of Shouyin, but sources portray the emperor as genuinely shocked by events. Moreover, the court, if suspicious of the loyalties of the governor, could have handled the matter in the usual fashion by issuing an order of reassignment to elicit a response, acting punitively only after receiving a rejection. Faced with this embarrassing turn of events, Mingzong made a stunning announcement: he would extend his stay in Kaifeng indefinitely and installed Shi Jingtang as the new Xuanwu governor. The former Liang capital was now favored with the presence of the cream of the Shatuo military crop, Mingzong and Jingtang. It was the beginning of the younger man's association with a city destined to be capital of his own empire a decade later.

Before long, the palace unleashed another bombshell in announcing the dismissal of Ren Huan, the chief councilor and concurrent fiscal commissioner, on the seventh day of the sixth month (927.06.07).³⁶ Huan had been frustrated for much of his year-long tenure, initially by the appointment of Cui Xie as fellow councilor, an illiterate man once denigrated by him as a "blank slab" (*wuzibei*).³⁷ Relations with Military Commissioner An Chonghui also soured over the pettiest of squabbles, including Huan's possession of a prostitute coveted by Chonghui that Huan refused to relinquish. But the event that brought frictions to a head related to political turf, in particular, the issuance of food and housing coupons for officials (*jiquan*): Chonghui wanted to shift the responsibility from the Ministry of Finance to the Military Commission over which he presided, whereas Huan insisted on retaining that prerogative in the Ministry of Finance, his own turf, consistent with dynastic precedent. In the fifth and sixth months, the two men had four separate confrontations of escalating intensity in the presence of Mingzong. When the emperor elected to side with Chonghui, Huan resigned, perfunctorily citing "illness" as cause. He petitioned three times before his appeal was accepted, retiring to his native Cizhou. His spirited fight had culminated in a spectacular fall. Huan had come to be held in high regard among colleagues in the civil service, despite the brevity of his tenure.

The intensity of the exchanges between Ren Huan and An Chonghui as the emperor stood nearby had appalled a palace woman within earshot, presumably someone of sufficient stature to attend the monarch during audience. She spoke privately with Mingzong upon his return to the residence, comparing the protocols for his court with the preceding Tang: "During my days in the palaces of Changan, I have never seen a chief councilor argue so vociferously with a military commissioner [in their sovereign's presence]. But ultimately their infelicities, Your Majesty, are an insult to

36. JWDS 38.524; XWDS 28.307; ZZTJ 275.9006.

37. *Beimeng suoyan* 18.337.

you!”³⁸ The debate between these men of great conviction, rather than demeaning the Son of Heaven, as the palace woman surmised, should be seen as a compliment to a government that refused to suppress vigorous debate. But the observation from the palace woman, someone perhaps similar to the emperor in age, caused him to begin to place his inner circle of aides under closer scrutiny.

Several months after Ren Huan’s dismissal and on the heels of Zhu Shouyin’s mutiny at Kaifeng, the Military Commission under An Chonghui launched a full repudiation of Huan by trying to tie him to the rebel. An imperial edict issued on the twelfth day of the tenth month (927.10.12), three days into the Kaifeng mutiny, denounced Huan for secret allegiance to Shouyin, citing reports of personal correspondence between the two men, correspondence which may have been fabricated altogether or impugned with sinister intent after the fact. Charges of infidelity against Huan were buttressed by allegations of managing revenues poorly in his capacity as fiscal commissioner. The execution order was issued without any serious investigation into the charges, as commonly occurs with political crimes at the highest level, for Huan had been charged with sedition. Upon receiving the mandate to commit suicide, this man of immense integrity summoned the men and women of his family for a final banquet before perishing together by poisoning.³⁹

According to one source, the *Historical Records*, the directive to execute the former councilor was forged by aides to An Chonghui, and the emperor informed of the action only after the fact—one of many cases where the military commissioner willfully subverted imperial powers.⁴⁰ The other sources for the period never challenge the authenticity of the imperial decree, but they present Mingzong as powerless in the face of Chonghui’s obstreperousness. All sources concur that the edict citing the crimes of Ren Huan as justification for execution was issued after his death in a worrisome departure from convention. The emperor had the option of firing Chonghui, had he found the commissioner’s actions objectionable, something he did not do, so Mingzong must bear ultimate responsibility for the injustice against Huan and his family.⁴¹ The court simultaneously announced an amnesty for certain taxes in arrears and reductions in labor service for families with relatives over eighty *sui*, which historians describe as Chonghui’s attempt to atone for his overreach. More likely, the amnesties and other charitable acts were timed to divert attention away from the slaying itself. Admittedly, Chonghui was a vindictive bully, but the scenario in the *Historical Records* paints him as treacherous and the emperor as ineffectual, the inverse of the independence that characterized Mingzong’s long life before the accession.

38. ZZTJ 275.9006.

39. JWDS 38.528–29, 67.896; ZZTJ 276.9009; XWDS 28.307.

40. XWDS 24.252.

41. XWDS 6.58.

The greatest outcry against the slaying of Ren Huan came from Zhao Feng, the academician and future chief counselor, who defended him as a “righteous official” for whom capital punishment was a grave injustice. But the brutally honest Feng never questions the legality of the execution order; he never charges Chonghui with forging a mandate of the Son of Heaven.⁴² Moreover, inasmuch as the leading actors at court, including the monarch, were all at the temporary capital of Kaifeng when the execution order for Huan was issued, the source and timing of the edict must have been impossible to pinpoint. In all likelihood, the palace overreacted to events because it was caught off guard in a mutiny of potentially tragic dimensions due to the presence of the emperor in the field. But the ongoing solidarity of the monarch with his military commissioner speaks to his continued confidence in his military brass.

Proof that the palace was caught unawares by events at Kaifeng can be seen in the decree denouncing Ren Huan, where Mingzong reflects on the reasons for his sojourn in advance of the insurrection:

We were advised by close courtiers to visit Jun county (Henan) and temporarily left the capital in order to celebrate with the people the ongoing bounty and enduring repose of our times. Unexpectedly, evil subjects engaged in sudden acts of sedition, an episode so perilous that our dynasty came close to being unhinged.⁴³

The passage confirms that Mingzong had no sense of the tumult awaiting him at Kaifeng, which explains his consternation upon receiving the news. His reference to sedition so severe that “our dynasty came close to being unhinged” suggests that the monarch’s security had been seriously jeopardized, as the imperial entourage was still on the highways. The experience must have caused the palace to suspect the mutineers of enjoying the protection of others, including senior administrators in the capital like Ren Huan. The emperor took action on several fronts in response to his heightened sense of vulnerability. First, he named his eldest son Congrong as interim custodian for Weizhou and later custodian for the ancestral home at Jinyang.⁴⁴ With a son now ensconced at Weizhou and son-in-law Shi Jingtang presiding over Kaifeng, the emperor had once again deployed a mixture of clansmen and affines to defend the auxiliary capitals.

As winter descended in the early days of the twelfth month of 927, Mingzong could return to savor life’s simple pleasures at his temporary capital. He presided over a banquet in the Yuande Palace of Kaifeng for his “councilor group” (*zaichen*), which presumably included chief counselors, assistant counselors, military commissioners and their deputies.⁴⁵ He paid visits to the residences of senior commanders Shi Jingtang and Kang Yicheng on the twenty-third day (927.12.23), going for a hunt four

42. ZZTJ 276.9009; XWDS 28.309.

43. JWDS 38.529.

44. JWDS 38.529–30.

45. JWDS 38.530.

days later in the eastern suburbs of Kaifeng.⁴⁶ His highly active social schedule suggests a desire to make the most of his emancipation from Luoyang, although admittedly the imperial calendar contains far fewer commitments in the winter months.

Toward the end of 927, Mingzong had a fascinating exchange with two men, Chief Councilor Feng Dao and a prefect from the north, Zhou Lingwu. Lingwu began by praising the prevailing peace as a reflection of the far-reaching virtues of the new administration: “The lands north of the mountains enjoy extraordinary peace, as barbarians of every race refrain from mutual aggression. North of Yanmen for several thousand *li* from east to west, a peck of grain costs less than ten coins.” The emperor wanted to further facilitate the goodwill of Heaven by doing even more good deeds, prompting Feng Dao to caution against excessive activism, his words more akin to those of a Daoist cleric than a Confucian statesman:

At the end of Zhuangzong’s reign, a lack of concern for his armies and his people, combined with indulgence in sensual pleasures, caused the wrath of the people to befall him and all-pervading tumult to ensue. Your Majesty has elevated the aspirations of the people such that harvests are plentiful, a direct consequence of Your Majesty’s purity of character. I would hope that Your Majesty finds contentment in the serenity of the times as you guard against potential perils.⁴⁷

In effect, Feng Dao warned against the possibility of making matters worse through excessive intrusion into daily governance, placing “purity of character” before a laundry list of programs, which should be left to courtiers. The advice appears to have fallen upon deaf ears.

Toward the end of 927, Mingzong began the process of establishing an ancestral temple at Yingzhou, northern Hedong, turning the family compound into a temple to honor four generations of ancestors.⁴⁸ Ceremonies in the capital, usually widely publicized events of solemn celebration, were probably more restrained in this case, as Mingzong and his predecessor belonged to different bloodlines and the conduct of rites to different sets of ancestors only reminded observers of his own illegitimacy. A year later, as the temples at Yingzhou prepared for formal opening, Minister of Rites Han Yanyun was dispatched to preside over the ceremony.⁴⁹ Mingzong had orchestrated the events surrounding his ancestral temple with estimable subtlety. The only tragic news on record for the winter involved an earthquake on the first day of the twelfth month at Xuzhou (927.12.01), one slightly smaller than the earthquake at Zhengzhou five months earlier.⁵⁰

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46. JWDS 38.531.

47. JWDS 38.530.

48. JWDS 38.531; CFYG 1.13.

49. JWDS 39.542.

50. JWDS 38.530; WDHY 10.172.

Twice during the first month of 928, Mingzong suspended audience for a day each to honor the lives of two recently deceased courtiers, university chancellor Zhu Shousu, and regional governor Yuan Jianfeng. Similar observances for distinguished public servants would occur a total of nine times in the course of 928, suspensions that usually involved a single day of remembrance.⁵¹ This venerable practice of suspending audience had a long history in China, intended to honor public service, but it also suited the political priorities of Emperor Mingzong to raise the ethics of senior administrators by celebrating exemplars in the most public manner. The vast majority of honorees in 928 were men of military ilk, partly a reflection of the monarch's historic association with the armed forces and partly due to the military's dominant role in local and national affairs. Honoring the memory of the university chancellor signaled a growing interest in educational matters, which thus far had been slighted by the administration.

The palace announced investitures for Consort Cao as the Pure Concubine and Consort Wang as the Virtuous Concubine in the first month of 928.⁵² The elevation of Woman Wang as secondary consort must have raised a few eyebrows, a domestic servant whose principal asset was physical beauty. For now, Mingzong refrained from installing either consort as empress, even though Woman Cao enjoyed superior standing in the household. The elevation of consorts is another matter generally settled at the beginning of a reign. Neither woman had produced a male heir, so Mingzong faced less pressure to settle things. His predecessor had married one woman, then elevated another to empress after the birth of a son, which complicated his domestic life. Apart from principal consorts, Mingzong's harem included twenty to thirty lesser consorts, roughly half of whom held formal titles, but they appear to have exerted little sway over the throne.

Mingzong announced plans for a second imperial progress on the sixth day of the first month (928.01.06), this time to Weizhou, roughly two hundred kilometers north of Kaifeng on the other side of the Yellow River, a progress made by his predecessor several years earlier. The court seems to have intentionally issued the pronouncement merely eleven days before the planned departure. The appointment of eldest son Congrong as interim regent for the city, precisely one month before the announcement, suggests that the tour had been contemplated even earlier, but the short interval between announcement and departure seems designed to avoid the anxieties triggered by his trip to Kaifeng in the previous year, which incited a mutiny. But an eminent cluster of senior civilians resisted his plans in the strongest terms, predicting a negative reaction from local military leaders. Initially, the monarch stood firm; the trip was part of a well-considered scheme of An Chonghui to keep local strongmen on the defensive. Civilian courtiers were less convinced of the need for a second imperial progress so soon after the first. The rhetorically gifted Hanlin academician, Zhao Feng, raised

51. JWDS 39.533, 39.543.

52. JWDS 39.535; XWDS 14.158.

the matter again with the Military Commission: “his petition chiding Chonghui employing language both incisive and direct.”⁵³ Mingzong proceeded with additional deliberations before electing to cancel the tour. His frustrations can well be imagined, the paranoia of a small but determined group thwarted an important policy initiative. But the fact that civilians prevailed in this particular contest against a cohesive military leadership augured well for their clout in the future. The military commissioners could no longer formulate policy without consulting their civilian colleagues.

The retirement of Chief Councilor Zheng Jue was announced in the third month. His replacement turned out to be the marginally literate Zhenzhou governor, Wang Jianli, an old imperial acquaintance. Mingzong had expressed frustration about the long wait for a new position for Jianli after summoning him to the capital. Sources say that he had initially considered elevating the former governor to military commissioner, due to growing frictions with An Chonghui, but relented after intimates like Zhu Hongzhao rallied to Chonghui’s defense. The palace thus appointed Jianli to the highest civilian post.⁵⁴ Months later, Jianli would cite “insufficient literacy” in requesting reassignment, appeals rejected by the palace.⁵⁵ Deploying military men as councilors ran the risk of involving them in matters well beyond their competence. In the words of Kong Xun, an appointee to the Ministry of Rites with similar deficiencies, “Matters of ritual are too important to be overseen by [men like myself].”⁵⁶ Mingzong appreciated the problem, but stuck to his original decision.

The palace presided over a festive reception for the Daoist master Xie Yuangui in the early months of 928, a man originally from the Taibai Mountain region (modern Shaanxi), who later sojourned for many years in Sichuan. The cleric professed to be 101 *sui*, a badge of his proficiency at the Daoist art of prolonging life, an increased concern of the emperor in his sixties.⁵⁷ After noting the pilgrim’s humorous appearance, Mingzong bestowed purple pigments and honored him with the sobriquet Zhibai (“Pristine Knowledge”) prior to returning him to his native place. His predecessor had tended to be partial to Buddhism, due to the influence of his leading palace women, but Mingzong’s powerful attraction to the mystical elements of Daoism appears more in step with early Tang monarchs. Nonetheless, curiosity does not equate with conversion and the monarch remains a mystery in terms of personal faith.

The administration elevated Shi Gui to Auxiliary academician at the Military Commission in the fifth month of 928. Gui had served as civilian aide during the monarch’s tenure at Zhenzhou. He also proved invaluable to An Chonghui, whose lack of literacy caused him to make frequent use of Gui, especially for personnel matters.⁵⁸ Shi

53. ZZTJ 276.9013; JWDS 39.525; XWDS 28.309.

54. ZZTJ 276.9014–15.

55. ZZTJ 276.9022.

56. JWDS 39.536.

57. JWDS 39.537.

58. JWDS 39.538, 92.1217–18.

Gui's appointment serves as a reminder of the fact that Military Commissions were staffed mostly by men sufficiently literate to communicate with other offices in the capital, governors in the provinces, and armies in the field. Military men with marginal literacy may have dominated a cluster of the commission's senior positions, but they were dependent on a wide spectrum of literate professionals to manage their affairs.

During the summer of 928, Mingzong's special affinity for the environment was reflected in the release into the wilderness of seven deer from the imperial game preserve (*neiyuan*), a sprawling compound located south of the Luo River.⁵⁹ Historically, releasing animals into their natural habitat was a way of honoring life in its manifold manifestations, a characteristically Buddhist idea, while the act of imperial clemency for sentient beings conforms to conventional Confucian expectations of virtuous rule. The release of animals also emanated, I would argue, from the monarch's special fondness for the natural environment unadorned by human enhancements: the game preserve was a contrived space, unlike hunting grounds in the outdoors, so visits to hunting grounds were more frequent. Sources do not elaborate on the reasons for releasing only seven deer, as opposed to the entire population, but a token release is better than none at all.

The palace learned of the death of Huo Yanwei in the eleventh month of 928. As reported in the *Historical Records*, "Mingzong was hunting in the nearby suburbs when a courier announced the death. He returned to the imperial compound in tears and suspended court for three days, while forgoing all merriment for the remainder of the month."⁶⁰ The deaths of few contemporaries seem to have triggered similar levels of spontaneous grief, even for a man given to a fairly free expression of emotions. Decades later, in the early Song, Yanwei was one of several men honored with a tablet in the temple of Mingzong, another sign of his rarified historical stature.⁶¹ The commander with one eye had played a critical role in the military politics of the past three decades, evolving into a critical supporter of Mingzong at key moments in his ascent. At the time of death, Yanwei was the only figure in the capital capable of challenging the opinions of An Chonghui, so his passing would have a demonstrably negative impact on decision-making in the future.

Huo Yanwei also had a little known impact on political conventions of the day. He kept a retainer over the years, Chunyu Yan, whose literacy in Chinese and knowledge of warfare made him an invaluable asset to the illiterate Yanwei. The aide eventually accompanied the commander across multiple postings, Yanwei's special stature allowing him to flaunt regulations prohibiting the retention of staff members on a permanent basis. "The rule permitting governors to bring along their own civilian aides began with Chunyu Yan," the dynastic histories report. So long as governors informed

59. JWDS 39.539. On the location of the preserve, see Zhang Qiyun, *Zhongguo lishi ditu*, Vol. 2, p. 4.

60. JWDS 39.543, 64.851–53; XWDS 46.506.

61. JWDS 64.853.

the court in advance, they could keep a select number of staff members on a permanent basis.⁶² In effect, due to his personal regard for Yanwei, the emperor waived a key policy intended to keep governors dependent on local aides by denying them a permanent staff under their direct control. But whatever benefit derived from the regulations must have been offset by the immense waste involved in changing the support staff of governors on a regular basis.

As the year 928 came to a close, Emperor Mingzong found himself at odds with officials over the education and titular standing of eldest son Congrong, the presumptive heir to the throne. A senior compiler in the History Bureau, Zhang Zhaoyuan, petitioned the emperor about the longstanding tradition of assigning erudite Confucians to educate imperial sons in preparation for governing. The son had received instruction in Chinese from early on, but imperial tutors were considered mentors in the broadest sense, not simply teachers. Zhaoyuan also addressed China's historical preference to nominate an heir-apparent as early as possible, a practice less common in Inner Asia.⁶³ The historian's point of information doubled as a reminder that Mingzong, now in the third year of his reign, had failed to elevate his eldest son, then likely in his late teens, to crown prince, even though the youth was now an adult. This is the first occasion on record where a civilian official dared to engage the succession matter, an issue so sensitive that senior courtiers preferred to relegate it to a lesser figure. Yet the petitioner seemed indifferent to the fact that Mingzong's predecessor, Zhuangzong, had similarly refrained from installing his own eldest son as heir-apparent, a youth similar in age. Both emperors must have had their reasons for holding back, reasons surely familiar to their closest advisors, although never articulated to the public.

Zhang Zhaoyuan's petition also alluded to the need to "preclude calamitous turmoil by distinguishing legitimate sons from commoners with pretenses."⁶⁴ The statement seems an undisguised allusion to the monarch's favorite adopted son, the forty-something Congke, a man whose ambitions might prove difficult to contain in the emperor's absence. Palace insiders had long criticized the ego of eldest son Congrong, but this petition from Zhaoyuan appears the first criticism from the outer court of the equally egotistical and abrasive adopted son. The emperor heaved a deep sigh at hearing Zhaoyuan's words, sources say, but he could neither elevate eldest son Congrong above second son Conghou, for whom he personally had a soft spot, nor marginalize Congke, whom he loved like his own flesh and blood. The throne's only concession to the petitioner involved arranging tutors for Congrong.

The outward arrogance of the eldest son actually served to camouflage deep-seated insecurities that bordered on paranoia. Congrong was convinced that a solid block of

62. XWDS 46.506. Another source gives the eighth month of 926 as the beginning of the new policy; see WDHY 25.396.

63. ZZTJ 276.9026.

64. ZZTJ 276.9026.

influential aides favored younger son Conghou over him; he complained of “people who constantly lavish praise on him [Conghou] while speaking ill of me.”⁶⁵ Indeed, the younger Conghou, although just beyond puberty, had emerged as precociously mature and circumspect, while the eldest son seemed inclined toward frivolity in his personal life in ways eerily similar to his father’s predecessor. The younger son Conghou also possessed a striking resemblance to Mingzong. Meanwhile, the marriage for Conghou to the daughter of Kong Xun, a prominent turncoat commander from Liang times, had further elevated the youth’s stature within military circles.⁶⁶ But eldest son Congrong would soon be promoted to custodian of Henan, the administrative seat of the capital, placing at his disposal a sizable army and a network of well-placed allies capable of mobilizing behind him.

One commander-in-chief for infantry, Yang Siquan, seems to have intentionally stoked the insecurities of Congrong, while making self-aggrandizing promises to protect his interests in the case of a challenge to his enthronement: “You have no reason to worry about [securing your succession], so long as I am around!”⁶⁷ Commander Yang also quietly encouraged the son to mobilize loyal fighters in anticipation of the worst-case scenario. The provocative statement eventually reached the emperor’s ears through an unimpeachable source, Feng Yun, the capital’s deputy custodian. Mingzong summoned Commander Yang to explain things, but then suspended further inquiry, after an emotional appeal from Congrong.

* * *

Early in the second month of 929, the administration at the temporary capital of Kaifeng learned that the walled city of Dingzhou had succumbed to Tang armies, as local commander Ma Rangneng opened the gates of the city in surrender. Besieged for over a half year, Dingzhou had obviously depleted supplies of food and munitions. The rebel Wang Du had already committed suicide, but his body was retrieved for dispatch to the capital. The captives included two thousand mercenaries from the north, residuals from an initial deployment of nearly twenty thousand, the bulk of whom had either scattered after the city’s fall or returned to their homeland sometime before.⁶⁸ Mingzong personally reviewed the long procession of captives from the Xian’an Tower of Kaifeng on the twenty-first day of the month (929.02.21), where the myriad of officials appeared in formation to observe the formal pronouncement of victory. Then, the bodies of numerous captives were subject to a brutal quartering by chariots. The acclaimed Kitan commander Tunei perished in captivity along with a son. The four

65. ZZTJ 276.9026–27.

66. ZZTJ 276.9024.

67. ZZTJ 276.9026–27.

68. JWDS 40.548; ZZTJ 276.9027.

surviving sons and a brother of Wang Du faced summary execution as well, while the head of Du was presented at the Altar for Imperial Sacrifices in Luoyang (*Taishe*), in the manner of an earlier Dingzhou traitor.⁶⁹ Death had come slightly earlier for Li Jitao, Dingzhou's puppet emperor, who fancied himself as the heir to Zhuangzong. In this way, the ten-month Dingzhou uprising was quelled, ending the longest insurgency in the reign.

The emperor hosted a banquet at Kaifeng to celebrate the Dingzhou suppression, a festive occasion where eunuchs presented prize horses to their sovereign.⁷⁰ Mingzong occasionally accepted gifts from official subjects, as noted earlier, but in this case the source was the eunuch population, the lowest of menials in the palace, and reflects a higher offense against traditional etiquette. Most officials in attendance appear to have savored the festivities, with the exception of Feng Dao, who warned, "The original evil has been eradicated, but Your Majesty should not forget the potential for peril to lurk in the midst of tranquil times. If you succeed in appreciating this principle, then a truly lasting peace cannot be far off."⁷¹ Ruminations on the "perils of peace" symbolized Dao's preference for a political middle path, where the euphoria of the moment does not produce unguarded arrogance. In the case of Dingzhou, the Kitan had cleverly exploited China's internal enemies to wreak considerable havoc, which presented a greater threat than opportunistic raids along the border that had characterized aggression in the past. The humiliating defeat of their mercenaries at Dingzhou should not diminish the genius of the Kitan leader in laying such a perilous trap.

On the heels of pacifying Dingzhou, Mingzong announced with little fanfare that the government would return to Luoyang in short order. He left Kaifeng on the twenty-fourth day of the second month (929.02.24) and reached Luoyang six days later, bringing to a close his historic fourteen-month sojourn.⁷² Sources say little about how a police action against the briefest of mutinies had managed to mushroom into a yearlong imperial stay or why the time now seemed right to end it. We must assume that the three objectives that brought him to Kaifeng—namely, quashing the insurgency of Zhu Shouyin at Kaifeng, guarding against potential insurgency at Weizhou, and managing the Dingzhou suppression—were now considered complete. The monarch confirmed as much in the following decree: "Formerly, I set out to secure the strategically important Weizhou and eradicate a villainous upstart at Kaifeng, thereby securing the safety of the people while consoling the masses."⁷³ He finished the passage by acknowledging ongoing pressure from officials to end the sojourn in order to focus on the Mingtang ceremonies in the coming spring. Regardless of motives, the emperor

69. Zhuangzong had followed a similar ritual upon defeating the enemies of the Later Tang state; see XWDS 37.397.

70. CFYG 111.1208.

71. CFYG 81.888.

72. JWDS 40.548; ZZTJ 276.9027.

73. CFYG 114.1246.

had succeeded in challenging conventions that imposed minimal mobility upon reigning monarchs. The imperial cocoon had been broken. On the eve of his departure, Mingzong named Duanming academician Zhao Feng as prefectural co-administrator for the civil and military affairs of Kaifeng, a remarkable purview of powers for a civilian courtier with little military experience. A civilian would now serve as principal check on military power in the city. The court also announced the incoming governor for the city, Fu Xi, another officer with proven loyalty to Mingzong and his predecessor.⁷⁴ The recruitment of such heavyweights seems to reflect lingering concern about the reliability of the military establishment at Kaifeng, despite the prolonged imperial presence.

A month after his return to Luoyang in 929, officials presented Mingzong with a troubling case of *lèse majesté* in the person of Li Congcan, an imperial nephew then perhaps barely twenty.⁷⁵ During the monarch's absence from Luoyang, the nephew had presided as commissioner of security for the Inner City and other imperial venues in and around Luoyang, giving him extensive access to normally restricted spaces. In the company of friends at the Huijie Gardens, an inebriated Congcan playfully mounted an imperial couch. By law, the use of imperial furniture, however innocent in intent, was subject to summary death and Military Commissioner An Chonghui surely pressured Mingzong to follow the dictates of the law. Mingzong banished Congcan, followed with orders to commit suicide, another difficult concession to officialdom.

Renovations to the Jiaqing Palace, a building centuries old and recently ravaged by fire, were nearly complete in the fourth month of 929 when architects petitioned for an extra application of lacquer in glittering reds and gold to restore the original splendor. To the astonishment of everyone within earshot, Mingzong refused, insisting, "Repairs are unavoidable in light of the fire damage to the palace, but they should be limited to restoring [the needed] majesty without wasting [more] on luxurious adornments."⁷⁶ In another rendering of his final comment, Mingzong states, "Heaven unleashes fire to admonish me. How is further waste fitting?"⁷⁷ The concept of Heaven as an admonishing force was widely accepted in traditional China, but the immediacy of Heaven to man as reflected in the above quotation, the ability to render swift rebuke, may well be a mark of nomadic cultural influence.⁷⁸ Apart from changing the name from the Jiaqing to the Guangshou Palace, enhancements to the structure's exterior must have been

74. JWDS 40.548–49, 59.792–93.

75. JWDS 40.549; XWDS 15.167; ZZTJ 276.9028. Many sources consider Congcan as a son of Mingzong, which seems improbable in light of the sentence, capital punishment, which would have been waived if a biological son was involved. Congcan's personal name, with a jade radical, does not match the naming pattern for Congrong and Conghou, the emperor's biological sons. Thus, Congcan was either an adopted son or more likely a nephew, as argued by Ouyang Xiu; see CFYG 295.3333; ZZTJ 276.9028; WXTK 257.

76. JWDS 40.549.

77. XWDS 6.66.

78. Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, pp. 144–48.

minimal.⁷⁹ Here is another instance where Mingzong exploited a minor incident to raise the ethical aspirations of an entire administration. His predecessor, Zhuangzong, had spent much on beautification of the city upon relocating the capital to Luoyang. As a man born and educated in China, Zhuangzong appreciated the relevance of grand surroundings to projecting imperial power. Mingzong seems to have been downright indifferent, if not hostile, to such matters.

By 929, the fourth year of the reign, courtiers began to liken Mingzong to China's earliest Sage Kings. Chief Councilor Feng Dao appears to be the first among his admirers to make the connection explicit, writing:

Your Majesty is pure and virtuous, connected above to the heart of heaven. It is said that Yao and Shun are the rulers that people most admire, while Jie and Zhou are the rulers that people most detest, a function of whether the men possessed or did not possess the Way. Today, Your Majesty earnestly cultivates frugality and virtue, focusing your heart on the way of governing while refusing to burden the people beyond reasonable limits. Therefore, it is said, the times of Yao and Shun are celebrated for little more than delivering peace to the people and permitting customs to flourish.⁸⁰

It is a remarkable statement on the public image of Mingzong scarcely four years into the reign such that courtiers dared to invite comparisons with the Sage Kings. At the same time, the passage reminds the sovereign of the importance of peace as precondition to higher aspirations, a quintessentially Confucian view of governance. Historians have long lambasted Feng Dao as a sycophantic lapdog whose utterances should not be taken seriously, but my preference is to focus on the aspirational attributes of the above passage, where Dao endeavored to fine-tune the emperor's moral compass to the betterment of society.

The palace announced the elevation of Zhao Feng, the scrappy academician, to chief councilor on the fifteenth day of the fourth month (929.04.15).⁸¹ The appointment came a month and a half after a petition from Feng Dao to name another councilor, suggesting a vacancy of some duration, most likely due to the ambivalence of An Chonghui toward the nominee. Feng had figured prominently among the voices against the imperial tour of Weizhou, a proposal from the Military Commission that the palace eventually rejected. The elevation of the no-nonsense academician as chief councilor served the long-term interests of the dynasty by providing an alternative voice to Chonghui. At the same time, the two men appear to have been equally committed to ethical government and instinctively hostile to Buddhism, its clout as a church and its sway over men's minds. Mingzong's occasional charity toward Buddhism would decline modestly under the sway of Zhao Feng, demonstrating his growing receptive-

79. CFYG 56.594.

80. CFYG 314.3555.

81. JWDS 40.549–50; XWDS 28.309–10.

ness to civilian advisors. The administration subsequently imposed restrictions on the income and residence of Buddhist clerics, which suggests a slight diminution in the religion's institutional power in the later years of the reign.⁸²

The monarch also acted in the fourth month of 929 to enhance his personal security by posting eldest son Congrong as co-administrator of the Six Armies and custodian of Henan, the administrative seat of the capital. Mingzong also named younger son Conghou, then sixteen *sui*, as interim custodian for the northern capital at Jinyang, replacing the eldest son.⁸³ An assignment away from the capital was critical to cultivating Conghou as an alternative successor, but the combination of posts entrusted to the eldest son played into the narrative that the emperor saw him, not Conghou, as likely successor. The Chinese practice of elevating a single son above the others as soon as possible served to avoid the sort of fraternal antagonisms that had dogged the Shatuo a generation earlier when, on the heels of Li Keyong's death his brother, Li Kening, challenged the succession of his son, the future Zhuangzong, but Mingzong refused to be rushed.

Among the notable administrative changes, the government ordered that Weizhou, dubbed the Ye capital under the monarch's predecessor, revert to its original name in the summer of 929. The city had served as base of political and military operations for the decade preceding the unification of the north in 923, and Zhuangzong acceded to the throne at Weizhou, converting a polo field into an altar of accession. The capital shifted to Kaifeng in the tenth month and then to Luoyang by year's end, after which Zhuangzong returned to Weizhou only for a short spell, although the city retained its nominal status as secondary capital. But for Mingzong, Weizhou was the site of the mutiny that triggered the unraveling of his predecessor's reign. In changing Weizhou from a capital city to an ordinary prefecture, Mingzong intended to diminish its political stature in the present, while hopefully precluding its resurgence as the center of divisive military struggles in the future.

The mandate changing the name of Weizhou included a provision to convert the former imperial residences at Weizhou and Kaifeng into offices for the local governors.⁸⁴ The buildings would need to be stripped of imperial paraphernalia and substantially renovated. The court would no longer assign interim custodians to the cities nor consign sizable security details to them, thereby saving on the dual costs of maintenance and administrative oversight. The conversion of imperial residences into government offices was designed to preclude the future use of the cities as temporary capitals. It would also discourage the monarch's successors from visiting the areas, even for periods of short duration. Sources fail to cite the court's rationale, but it seems short-sighted in light of the turbulence at both Weizhou and Kaifeng since the dynasty

82. WDHY 12.195–99.

83. Zhang Qifan, *Wudai jinjun*, p. 50.

84. JWDS 40.551–52; ZZTJ 276.9030.

began. Clearly, after a yearlong stay in Kaifeng, Mingzong had concluded that a regular imperial presence at these secondary capitals was unnecessary to effect control. He was woefully wrong.

Over the summer months of 929, the palace announced the political lineup for the upcoming sacrifices at the Mingtang Hall and the southern suburbs (*nanjiao*), whose date was now set for the coming spring, a two-year delay due to domestic distractions such as the Kaifeng mutiny. The event would be led by Chief Councilor Feng Dao, designated as Grand Commissioner of Ceremonies and several esteemed colleagues from the civil service, including Minister of War Lu Zhi, named Commissioner of Ceremonial Proprieties. The emperor's eldest biological son, Congrong, would be included as well, responsible for imperial security in his capacity as commissioner for ceremonial transportation.⁸⁵ The selection of Feng Dao as grand commissioner confirms his heady political stature at the time, while the inclusion of Congrong implies his superior standing within the royal family. The rites would be overseen chiefly by civilian courtiers, with military men relegated to supporting roles.

Mingzong paid a high-profile visit at the end of the eighth month of 929 to a prominent Buddhist temple, Jinzhenguan. There, he conferred the title of Yuanhui Master upon a nun originally surnamed Chen, the former consort of Li Keyong, Mingzong's adopted father, which made her nominally the emperor's stepmother, even though Woman Chen may well have been younger than him.⁸⁶ They probably had not met since Keyong's death in 908, so the occasion allowed them to rekindle fond memories of Keyong, whose charity a half century earlier had radically altered the lives of both individuals, elevating Siyuan to the throne and leaving Woman Chen nominal stepmother to two emperors, Zhuangzong and Mingzong.

Sometime during the late autumn of 929, Chief Councilor Feng Dao delivered one of his most memorable parables on a familiar theme, the "perils of peace," in which he adroitly connected the experiences of daily life with abstractions about good governance. Yet by employing an everyday horse ride as metaphor, the story resonated with the emperor like few others:

During my tenure as administrative secretary at Hedong, I served as envoy to Zhongshan and passed through the difficult terrain of Jingxing along the way. Fearing my horse might stumble, I dared not relax the reins and bit. But it was on level land where conditions were seemingly harmless that the horse suddenly stumbled and sustained injury. Thus, humans have a proclivity in the face of peril to save themselves through thoroughgoing vigilance, while tranquil times leave them careless about threats to their very lives.⁸⁷

85. JWDS 40.553.

86. JWDS 40.554.

87. XWDS 54.613; ZZTJ 276.9032.

Coming at a time when the monarch remained energetic about his imperial duties and the dynastic fortunes appeared sound, Dao's statement was brilliantly timed to caution against the human inclination to turn smug through conceit.

From the perils of peace, the conversation between the two men shifted to the livelihood of the people, where Mingzong demonstrated an impressive capacity to appreciate the chasm between a flourishing economy and a prosperous society as reflected in the following query directed at Feng Dao: "The world may be prosperous, but have the masses felt relief?" Allowing wealth to trickle downward to the masses was no easy task; Dao reminded him that "expensive grains leave farmers starving, but cheap grains will ruin their farms." The profundity of this simple statement about the importance of price stability to social order, words from someone experienced as a farmhand, truly inspired Mingzong. Although fifteen years Dao's senior, the emperor remained an eager student. Elsewhere, Dao praised the emperor "for employing worthies of the first order and uprooting evil without vacillation."⁸⁸ In reality, the men in the emperor's inner circle were far from perfect, but none rightfully deserves to be characterized as sinister or self-promoting in the manner of a whole class of persons under the preceding administration.

At the same time that relations with civilians like Feng Dao were improving, the monarch's relationship with An Chonghui grew progressively strained, occasionally over trivial matters like Mingzong's acquaintances. One case involved Kang Fu, an old associate of Li Keyong and former director of the elite multi-ethnic armies. Fu had shared many personal experiences with Mingzong over recent decades, his command of several Inner Asian languages strengthening his appeal to the monarch, who possessed a facility in at least one other Inner Asian language.⁸⁹ Whenever he visited the palace, the emperor would extend Fu's stay to converse in their common language, which reportedly irritated the military commissioner. Chonghui eventually accused Fu of "frivolously petitioning the court" on matters beyond his purview, conduct that potentially undermined his own authority as the chief conduit for communications with the throne. Fu had also acquired considerable wealth over the years, enabling him to procure a stable of over a thousand horses. The procurement of horses on such a scale presented a more serious problem for governments of the day, due to the potential for conversion into a private army. In this way, the favorite's entire record came under scrutiny.

An ugly confrontation ensued between Kang Fu and An Chonghui, where the ill-tempered commissioner threatened to slay the commander on the spot. In the tenth month of 929, Chonghui succeeded in orchestrating Fu's reassignment as governor for Shuofang and Hexi, plus surveillance commissioner for a cluster of five prefectures. Previous holders of this combination of posts for the region, an area bordering the

88. CFYG 37.395.

89. ZZTJ 276.9033–34; JWDS 40.554–55, 91.1199–1201.

Tanguts as well as the Tibetans, had eventually died as a consequence of troubles in local administration. A tearful Kang Fu thereby requested another posting in a private exchange with Mingzong, who referred the request to Chonghui, obviously expecting some sort of compromise. But Chonghui responded somewhat flippantly: “As prefect, Fu achieved nothing by way of tangible deeds or initiatives. How dare he aspire to something better! Moreover, the assignment orders have already been issued, so any modification would be difficult.” The emperor subsequently reported back to his friend, “Chonghui refuses to acquiesce. Your reassignment was not my preference!”⁹⁰ If taken at face value, the statement might infer imperial cravenness in the face of Chonghui’s stridency, but I suspect that Mingzong occasionally used his military commissioner as a foil to deflect resentment for unpopular decisions on his part. Moreover, Chonghui’s allegations about Kang Fu’s poor performance appear irrefutable, giving him ample cause to justify his actions. But the emperor, by pandering to friends, fell far short of his own rhetoric about official responsibility for one’s deeds.

Toward the end of 929, Mingzong issued a long list of directives pertaining to the proper conduct of his countrymen on “ominous days” (*jiri*)—that is, days associated with inauspicious events, including the deaths of imperial parents. He even insisted on suspending audiences for the preceding day.⁹¹ It appears that the regulations pertaining to inauspicious days had been either too lax or poorly enforced in the past, which might incur the wrath of the spirits.⁹² During the daylong fasting that accompanied ominous days, the emperor refrained from eating meat and warned officials against entering the imperial compound or petitioning the court about capital offenses, among other things. Public merriment and the butchering of animals were proscribed for a full day as well. Mingzong also imposed a ban on banquets in his own palace, which seems rather pointless for a day of abstinence, unless palace aides were lax in following the rules. The new regulations coincided with a grand assembly of one hundred Buddhist monks and fifty Daoist clerics for purposes of fasting and praying, men summoned from far afield. The combination of activities suggests that Mingzong took superstitions of the sort far more seriously than most monarchs.

90. JWDS 91.1200.

91. JWDS 40.556.

92. WDHY 4.61.

Chapter 4

Political Events: The Changxing Reign, 930–933

The year 930 began as the fifth year of Tiancheng, the emperor launching New Year's festivities at the Mingtang Hall.¹ Three years had passed since his last celebration at that illustrious venue due to the extended sojourn at Kaifeng. Mingtang was no ordinary hall: it had been constructed to host the first of several ceremonies to celebrate the confluence of family and dynasty. Six years earlier, the current monarch's predecessor, Zhuangzong, had similarly held New Year's audience at the Mingtang Hall prior to officiating over sacrifices in the southern suburbs, which culminated in additional rites at the hall.² Emperor Mingzong chose to conform to his itinerary, which in turn, had followed closely the practices of high Tang. The rites in the southern suburbs in 924, during the second year of Zhuangzong's reign, had occurred merely four months after the occupation of Kaifeng and two months after the capital's shift to Luoyang, causing many critics to consider the forty-year-old ruler presumptuous.

It was more common for rulers to select times of prolonged prosperity for the Mingtang rites. This was apparently the rationale in this case, inasmuch as the Later Tang empire by 930 had approached something of a summit, a change perceptible even to contemporaries. The dual feats of domestic tranquility and border stability had been sustained over some time. No one could charge Emperor Mingzong, four years into his reign, with acting precipitately. The grandiose Mingtang Hall in Luoyang had been built two centuries earlier by Empress Wu, and then rebuilt by her with considerably less grandeur after a fire, a vehicle cynically appropriated by the empress to legitimize a regime regarded by most observers as illicit.³ Emperor Mingzong likely preferred to forget the parallels between his regime and her own: governments both tainted by bloody usurpations at the outset that sought to absolve their sins on earth through a frenzy of prayers and libations to a higher power.

The second month moved from planning to execution of the Mingtang ceremonies. Wardrobe specialists in the palace worked extra hours to produce a "celestial cap" (*tongtianguan*) for the Son of Heaven, complemented by a single silk robe of ocher

1. JWDS 41.559.

2. JWDS 31.425.

3. *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 3, pp. 260, 300, 302–03, 311–12; Rothschild, *Wu Zhao*, pp. 151–56.

red, an outfit tailored for the event. His officials above the rank of five were permitted to don their usual attire of robes and trousers, something of a special dispensation, but the most senior aides appeared in the costumes reserved for formal court events.⁴ Mingzong entrusted security for his forays outside the palace to Shi Jingtang, senior guardsman, and Zhu Hongzhao, head of palace services, now elevated to interim custodian for the Forbidden City. The event would involve an imperial progress several days in duration, proceeding from the capital to its suburbs, eventually drawing in a sizable body of civil and military officials, so security personnel were on high alert.

The rituals began with a night of fasting at the Mingtang Hall, on the eighteenth day of the month (930.02.18). A day later, the monarch presided over ceremonies at the Temple to Taiweigong, a Daoist cult figure, a practice likely borrowed from the preceding Tang. Mingzong then progressed to the Imperial Ancestors Temple (*Taimiao*), a venerable site where he spent the night and fasted before rendering sacrifices at dawn to the ancestors of the dynasty. A day later, the emperor proceeded to the southern suburbs, his arrival coinciding with a light overnight rain. “Then, by the third drum, the sky suddenly turned as bright as daytime”—a miracle that only heaven could deliver, spectators must have surmised. At the final venue, the Altar of Heaven (*yuanqiu*), Mingzong conducted sacrifices to God and Heaven atop a circular mound; he was now joined by officials offering felicitations. Days and nights of prayers and movement would have been physically taxing for any man, but Mingzong, then sixty-four *sui*, managed to muster the stamina because the rites doubled as a celebration of the tremendous feat of his people in renewing a dynasty that four years earlier had veered toward extinction.

Upon concluding the rites in the southern suburbs on the twenty-first day of the second month (930.02.21), Mingzong hosted perhaps the most lavish reception of his reign at the Five Phoenix Tower, one of the newer venues in the city. Completed over a decade earlier under the Liang dynasty and located at the main entrance to the Forbidden City, the tower was likely chosen due to its sprawling and freshly painted courtyards, in contrast with the smaller palaces erected several centuries earlier when Luoyang was rebuilt as secondary capital of the Sui dynasty. Mingzong intentionally chose this venue, with its backdrop of dragons and phoenixes, to announce a change in reign name from Tiancheng (Heaven’s Fulfillment) to Changxing (Eternal Restoration), retroactively for the year of 930. A change in reign name usually signaled either a shift in the aspirations of the sovereign or, as in this case, an acknowledgement of feats already achieved. Similarly for Mingzong, the new name, “Eternal Restoration,” marked a shift from legitimizing the regime, that is, propitiating Heaven, toward consolidating the monarch’s stature as the vehicle by which the dynasty is forever rejuvenated.

4. JWDS 41.560.

A sweeping amnesty was declared in the wake of adopting the new reign name, consistent with tradition, but this time with a wider sweep that exempted only the worst criminal elements. Waivers were announced for an assortment of unpaid taxes for the preceding year in the spirit of magnanimity, a program similar in scope to the generous tax amnesty that occasioned Mingzong's accession four years earlier. The completion of the rites required a liberal conferral of gratuities and privileges upon civil and military officials. The demand for 1.5 million strings in cash from the governors of Sichuan to subsidize the event provides some sense of the magnitude of anticipated costs, clearly well in excess of several million strings, due to the protocols of gift-giving associated with the rites. Upon concluding the banquet at the Five Phoenix Tower, for example, the monarch bestowed gifts upon every attendee, including silver adornments for the saddles of their horses.⁵ And two months later, the palace announced a special round of favors for governors across the realm, another costly but necessary act of charity associated with major rituals.⁶

On the eve of the Mingtang sacrifices, the emperor had finally relented and accepted a new title of honor; he now became the Sagacious, Wise, Spiritual, Martial, Literate, Virtuous, Reverent, and Filial Emperor.⁷ He had declined a succession of petitions in years past to assume the illustrious titles, including a request several days earlier, but after completing a cluster of honors for the women and children in the royal family, the timing finally seemed right. In effect, Mingzong deferred honors for himself until his family had received due recognition.

The business of governing resumed after concluding rites in the southern suburbs. The winter had seen a dearth of snow, prompting Mingzong to convey to Chief Councilor Feng Dao his personal concern on the eleventh day of the first month (930.01.11). Dao's response was remarkably nonchalant: "Your Majesty is reverent and frugal in personal conduct, your compassion extending to the masses. So long as Your Majesty's heart is one with the heart of Heaven, moisture will surely come by springtime."⁸ It snowed on the following night, sources say, the emperor sitting stoically in his courtyard covered in white as he acquired a higher appreciation of the supremely even temperament of his chief councilor. Palace workers attempting to clear the snow from walkways faced an unexpected reproof from their sovereign, who insisted, "This is Heaven's gift to me!"⁹ The act of sitting exposed to the snow as workers held quiet vigil was intended to convey a combination of gratitude for Heaven's positive response to a crisis and humility before the awesome powers of nature. Feng Dao's perception of nature as something constant and predictable appears characteristic of the views of the Chinese educated elite in the tenth century, who could draw upon a trove of

5. CFYG 81.888.

6. JWDS 41.561.

7. JWDS 41.561, 563–64.

8. JWDS 41.559.

9. XWDS 6.66.

accumulated knowledge about the natural sciences. But fortunately, the superstitions of the emperor had little impact on his political judgment, at least for now.

Later in the fourth month of 930, the court demoted Minister of Revenues Li Lin to adjutant for Yanzhou (modern Shandong), arguing that “he had liaised with a spy from the lower Huai region to convey to the south a precious belt at the behest of An Chonghui.”¹⁰ The ambition of the military commissioner to target Wu for the empire’s next expansion was common knowledge among senior administrators, but this story relates to diplomatic outreach from Luoyang that backfired badly. Chonghui had learned from a southern spy that the chief councilor of Wu, Xu Zhigao, was prepared to surrender to the Later Tang, the rumor an intentional ruse on the part of Zhigao to embarrass the north. Chonghui responded in good faith by conveying a jade belt worth over a thousand strings of cash as token of the court’s goodwill. A year later, in the absence of a response from Wu, Chonghui realized that he had been duped and severely penalized Li Lin for giving credence to a faithless spy. The episode produced an immense loss of face for the administration and especially Chonghui, whose naïveté seems wholly out-of-character. Two months later, the government reassigned his son, An Chongxu (d. 931), then commissioner of security for Luoyang’s Inner City, to court liaison of Heyang command.¹¹ The action was presented as a promotion, although the son’s assignment in the provinces would deprive Chonghui of control over the security apparatus in the capital, an important pillar of his power base, leaving him vulnerable for the first time to his growing body of enemies.

Relations between An Chonghui and the palace deteriorated further in the fourth month of 930, after an event that revealed the limited clout of the commissioner when the monarch’s personal interests or sentiments were at stake. The deputy military director of Hezhong, Yang Yanwen, had taken over the town and locked out the local governor, Li Congke, his own superior officer who happened to be the emperor’s favorite adopted son. Yanwen had been a loyal lieutenant and friend of the governor, but he acted on a directive from the Military Commission that summoned Congke to the capital for “consultations.” A court summons commonly signaled suspicion at the highest levels, so Yanwen had legitimate cause to treat his former friend as a criminal suspect. He consequently locked Congke out of the city to force his speedy return to the capital. The actions of Yanwen forced Congke to be absent from his post without court approval, thereby failing to fulfill his most fundamental duty as governor, a capital offense under the code of martial conduct.

The directive summoning Congke to the capital had been forged by An Chonghui, according to multiple sources, the two men having a long history of bad blood. There are reports of occasional fistfights in the distant past, as they were similar in age and

10. JWDS 41.562.

11. JWDS 41.566.

temperament, but now the tensions had turned to deadly schemes.¹² The commissioner had artfully cornered the emperor's adopted son: if he declined the summons and tried to flee, he would likely perish on the highways; if he attempted to retake Hezhong by force of arms, he faced certain death upon apprehension; if he tried to return to the capital, he might be slain either en route to the city by some capricious governor or upon arrival by security personnel. Congke initially attempted to assuage Yanwen from beyond the wall, but to no avail.

Back in the capital, the military commissioner pressured Mingzong to dispatch Palace Guard Commander Yao Yanchou and Interim Custodian for the Western Capital, Suo Zitong, to quell what had been represented to him as an insurrection. The suppression took a mere five days and ended in the slaying of Yang Yanwen, the commanders ignoring explicit orders from the emperor to capture the commander alive, so that he could conduct an interrogation and render an independent assessment of events. Mingzong was convinced that Yanwen and Congke had been maligned, although not necessarily by his own military commissioner. In liquidating Yanwen, the Palace Guard commander had placed instructions from the Military Commission before a mandate of the emperor, which if true, speaks to the responsiveness of professional armies to instructions from the relevant organs in the capital, a major shift from the highly personalized nature of military power in the past. The adopted son sensed that Chonghui was behind these machinations and proceeded to Luoyang to begin a political offensive against him. The conniving of Chonghui against Congke is commonly attributed to petty rivalries between two strong-willed individuals. More sympathetic writers defend the commissioner for astutely appraising the adopted son as a latent threat to the dynasty that was better uprooted sooner than later.

News of victory in the Hezhong suppression caused officials in Luoyang to assemble for the usual celebration, only for Mingzong to solemnly interject, "I have failed to manage the affairs of my own family. You gentlemen have no cause to gather in celebration!"¹³ The adopted son was placed under house arrest upon returning to the capital, Mingzong spurning numerous pleas from him for a meeting. Still, his faith in Congke's innocence could not be shaken in the least. During meetings with officials, Chief Councilors Zhao Feng and Feng Dao, men without a history of personal frictions with the adopted son, conveyed their support for the death sentence by citing once again "Congke's failure to secure a city under his charge." Sources attribute this strong consensus among civilian leaders to pressure from An Chonghui, their longtime ally, which to my mind, overstates his sway with the emperor while understating their integrity. Days later, the two councilors reiterated the case for capital punishment, but Mingzong abruptly changed the topic. Chonghui expanded upon the sober facts a day later, during a private meeting with the monarch, at which point Mingzong seems

12. JWDS 41.562, 74.974; XWDS 24.253–54; ZZTJ 277.9040–42.

13. XWDS 24.254.

to have been prepared to relent, saying, "I will to defer to you, however you decide the case." But the commissioner reminded the throne that decisions pertaining to the death of imperial clansmen fell under the exclusive purview of the emperor. Aides could advise the monarch on the matter, but they could not render a judgment. Mingzong then pushed back for a second time, alluding to his special bond with Congke:

I was a petty lieutenant short on food and clothing when this youth carried lime bricks and collected horse dung for me, the one enabling the other to survive.
With my current stature as Son of Heaven, how am I powerless to shield him?

In the tone of his voice a quiet resolve had emerged to spare the son's life and officials wisely refrained from raising the matter again.

Congke ultimately survived, outsmarting the most powerful cabal of civil and military officials in recent history. It stands as testament to his special bond with the monarch, and more importantly, the strength of his networks within the military elite, including Shatuo ethnics, as a consequence of two decades of action in the field, experience that compensated for his background as a Chinese ethnic. Another critical factor in the survival of Congke was the support of the Pure Consort Wang, whom sources say kept him apprised of developments in the palace and surely rallied to his defense in private conversation with the emperor.¹⁴ Congke's original surname was Wang and Consort Wang, lacking a son of her own, treated him like kin. The perseverance and ultimate victory of Mingzong in the battle between the palace and the court over the fate of Congke is evidence of the monarch's deeply felt convictions about fatherhood and family. He had previously offered less resistance to the death of a nephew convicted of sitting on his sofa, but demands for the life of his most cherished adopted son was a different matter.

On the twenty-fifth day of the fourth month (930.04.25), mere days after the confrontation with courtiers over Congke, the emperor proceeded to the Wenming Hall to accept his new title of honor in a grand celebration of family and country. Presiding over the event was Chief Councilor Feng Dao, who crafted the edict, which cited a laundry list of imperial accomplishments and likened Mingzong once again to the Sage Kings of antiquity, men who had similarly rejuvenated the country at times of domestic travails and border threats. Dao finished the citation with the following inspirational line:

Your Majesty holds fast to the Supreme Way of Yao and Shun, he models himself on the Great Vacuity of the Sun and Moon. Your awe has humbled the barbarians and Your charity extends down to insects and fish. Those privileged to serve our country have enjoyed honors and bounty, while the few who opposed Heaven [by resisting its mandate] have succumbed to the executioner.¹⁵

14. ZZTJ 277.9042.

15. JWDS 41.563–64.

The passage reiterates the unique ability of Mingzong to combine charity and awe, *wen* and *wu*, in forcing the world into submission. He embodied the Supreme Way of the Confucian tradition as well as the Serene Vacuity of Daoism, at least in the eyes of his admirers. Despite the large turnout of courtiers and the ingratiating pen of Feng Dao, Mingzong likely found the festivities less than gratifying so long as Congke continued to suffer the ignominy of house arrest.

Toward the middle of the fifth month of 930, Mingzong presided over the investiture of Consort Cao as Empress. The elevation of Consort Cao, deferred until the fifth year of the reign, was exceedingly late by Chinese standards. She had produced the monarch's eldest daughter, wife of Shi Jingtang, but neither Consort Cao nor Consort Wang had a son or at least a son to survive infancy. The mother of eldest sons Congrong and Conghou, Woman Xia, was already dead, her posthumous elevation to empress coming even later in the reign. The high cost of investitures, including the conferral of gifts upon the extended family of the empress, might have factored into the decision to delay the ceremony, but other factors were likely at play as well, including differences with courtiers as pertains to the familiar tension between class and favor in selecting an empress.¹⁶ The investiture ceremony did generate an unexpected controversy when officials in their enthusiasm heralded the new empress as *dianxia* or "sovereign," a term generally reserved for the heir-apparent. The matter was placed before ritual experts, who recommended changing the appellation to "Empress Sovereign" (*huanghou dianxia*), another bit of unconventional nomenclature for a monarch never very comfortable with the ceremonial side of governing.¹⁷

A year later, Mingzong would elevate his favorite concubine, the Virtuous Consort Wang, to the Pure Consort (*Shufei*). Consort Cao had held this title before her installation as empress, so the honor effectively placed Consort Wang in the line of succession for the Middle Palace, should something happen to the empress.¹⁸ In the eighth month of 930, four months after the investiture of Woman Wang as the Pure Consort, the palace announced investitures for the monarch's surviving sons and daughters: eldest son Congrong as the Prince of Qin, second son Conghou as the Prince of Song, the wife of Meng Zhixiang as the Senior Princess of Fuqing, and the wife of Shi Jingtang as the Princess of Yongning.¹⁹ The Senior Princess of Fujing was the niece of Li Keyong. By tradition, investitures were conducted personally by the emperor in the capital, so the palace waived the usual protocol by investing the Senior Princess of Fuqing through a third party. She elected to continue residing at Jinyang when her husband, Zhixiang, assumed office in Chengdu in early 926, although she would join him in Shu sometime after the investiture.²⁰

16. CFYG 81.889.

17. JWDS 41.565.

18. ZZTJ 277.9058; JWDS 42.577.

19. JWDS 41.565–68; CFYG 300.3394.

20. XWDS 64.799–800; ZZTJ 275.9004–05.

The court announced the reassignment of the Prince of Song, Conghou, as governor for the strategically vital Zhenzhou, ending his tenure at Jinyang. Military experience at two strategic commands north of the Yellow River surely strengthened the profile of the sixteen-year-old as an alternative heir, should the eldest son die or become incapacitated. The assignment at Jinyang was intended to reinforce Conghou's familiarity with the Shatuo homeland. The father had been absent from the Jin base for many years, but in all likelihood children like Conghou stayed behind in Jinyang prior to 923, when conditions were too dangerous for dependents to travel with their father, who had spent much of the previous decade on various military assignments, some close to the front lines of war. In the years after the unification of North China, the children of Siyuan presumably moved with him during his several postings as governor.

With family honors over, Mingzong introduced a notable institutional change in the summer of 930 related to the court's prerogative to nominate local officials. The edict pronounced: "Henceforth, defense commissioners, military training commissioners, prefects, adjutants, and deputy governors will be assigned by the court, and no longer nominated by circuit authorities."²¹ For nearly a century, the most powerful of governors and other local leaders had flaunted government regulations by appointing their own support staff and even successors, forcing the court into merely rubber-stamping their choices. The Liang dynasty began the process of reasserting the state's prerogative in this realm, which often created open conflict with the local military establishment, whose alienation had been exploited by the Shatuo to mobilize the disaffected against the government. The decree apparently came in response to a petition in the previous year from the Shu governor, Meng Zhixiang, to appoint his own deputy governor, a request that Luoyang initially declined only later to approve in the face of the governor's obstreperousness.²² The case involving Zhixiang also highlights the vast chasm between passing a law and enforcing it, when the target happened to be an acquaintance of the throne.

In the summer of 930, the administration confronted and eventually neutralized the most serious campaign of character assassination against An Chonghui since the reign had begun. A senior commander in the Palace Guard, Zhang Jian, had been informed by the petty officer Bian Yanwen that "Chonghui has been informally enlisting warriors and amassing armor and weapons while secretly engaging the services of spies with the intent of assuming personal command of a campaign against Wu." Yanwen was a retainer of Li Qianhui, an old foe of the military commissioner. The allegations charged Chonghui with trying to supplant the current leadership in Wu to create his own satrapy.²³ Chonghui had long favored a campaign against Wu, a policy rejected outright by Mingzong. Informants had further contended that the commissioner had

21. ZZTJ 277.9043; JWDS 41.568.

22. XWDS 64.799.

23. XWDS 24.255; ZZTJ 276.9043.

consulted prognosticators who predicted an illustrious future, precisely as Mingzong had famously done on the eve of his own mutiny, even though Chonghui's deep-seated hostility toward fortunetellers was well known. Rumormongers thus deftly played on policy differences between the monarch and his commissioner to feed suspicions and drive rifts.

Despite some skepticism about the tall tales of Bian Yanwen, Mingzong presented the allegations to Chonghui, whose flustered response baffled the emperor. A combination of civil and military officials would rush to Chonghui's defense, their stridency leaving Mingzong all the more skeptical. He eventually consulted two senior military figures in the capital, An Congjin and Yao Yanchou, men considered more independent of the commissioner. They too denounced Yanwen for maligning Chonghui and offered the lives of their own families as guaranty of his innocence. An originally vacillating Mingzong was sufficiently moved by their conviction to dispose of Yanwen. At the same time, he summoned Chonghui to the palace, where the two men with full hearts cried profusely. The depiction of the pair of battle-hardened soldiers concluding the event in tears gives some sense of how close Chonghui came to being toppled.²⁴

The convergence of rumors and innuendo caused Chief Councilor Zhao Feng to intervene with his usual rhetorical flourish, emphatically defending the record of the military commissioner, while characterizing him as a pillar of the state: "Chonghui, rising from humble circumstances, has withstood precisely the tribulations that permits Your Majesty to succeed today in rejuvenating this grand enterprise of dynasty. How could we allow the sinister likes of Yanwen to create such tumult?"²⁵ In all likelihood, the chief councilor was equally riled that the palace initially handled the affair without involving civilian aides like himself or civilian agencies like the Censorate, similar to the way Zhuangzong had responded to the slanders against the military commissioner of his own day, a response that ultimately set the reign on a downward spiral. The noise had settled for the moment, but the Bian Yanwen incident exposed new vulnerabilities for Chonghui as he finished his fourth year in office. The incident further reveals that Mingzong had begun to question Chonghui's continued value to the government. And indeed, his demise was not far off.²⁶

* * *

The palace elevated Li Yu, the historian with dual competencies in politics and military affairs, to chief councilor toward the end of the third month of 931. Having participated in the campaign against Shu six years earlier, his experiences were likely deemed relevant to ongoing concerns about stability in the area. An Chonghui's replacement as

24. ZZTJ 277.9043; JWDS 41.567.

25. XWDS 28.310.

26. On the subsequent purge and death of Chonghui, see Chapter 6, pp. 169–73.

military commissioner was Zhao Yanshou, husband of the emperor's younger daughter.²⁷ Later Tang rulers commonly entrusted key security posts in the capital to their in-laws, but the appointment of imperial in-laws to the Military Commission was less common. Yanshou must have been in his twenties at the time, so he could never provide much in the way of leadership, which explains recruitment months later of another man for the Military Commission, Fan Yanguang, the same man who had earlier declined the assignment on the grounds of inexperience.²⁸

The monarch hosted a banquet for councilors, imperial princes, eunuchs, and assorted nobles at the Huijie gardens to celebrate the arrival of spring on the ninth day of the fourth month (931.04.09). The affair likely drew up to one thousand guests, making it one of the larger social events of the late reign.²⁹ The palace also announced plans to conduct rites at the Imperial Ancestors Temple, a rite that honored family as the foundation for dynasty. By the middle of the fourth month, Mingzong went to the Longmen Buddhist caves to pray for rain after a drought of some duration. He also issued amnesties to prisoners to appease Heaven and directed local officials to release their entire prison populations, excluding individuals guilty of capital offenses, which marks the most comprehensive amnesty thus far.³⁰ He announced as well the placement of tablets at the Imperial Altar of Zhuangzong for several prominent field commanders of the reign: Li Sizhao, Zhou Dewei, and Fu Cunshen.³¹ Observers must have been struck by the omission of Guo Chongtao—the premiere strategist before the accession and the dominant military commissioner afterward. Chongtao had served Zhuangzong with rare vigilance and vision, only to die in a manner eerily similar to An Chonghui five years later, the two men mirrors of one another in life and death. In reality, no man deserved the placement more than Chongtao and his omission speaks to the special sensitivities of Mingzong on the heels of slaying his own commissioner.

The departure of An Chonghui allowed the emperor to act on a long-deferred wish, the release from house arrest of his adopted son. Upon meeting the forty-something Li Congke for the first time since his departure for Hezhong several years earlier, the monarch marveled that he had somehow survived the cabal of senior courtiers: "Had I heeded the counsel of Chonghui, this meeting would never have come to pass."³² In reality, a host of officials, not solely the military commissioner, had called for the death sentence. Congke's house arrest had spanned a full year, but his resuscitation proceeded with great dispatch. He received immediate posting as interim custodian for the western capital, Changan, and the title General-in-chief (*Da jiangjun*). Before long, Congke was restored nominal powers as chief councilor, the final step in his

27. JWDS 42.577, 98.1311.

28. JWDS 42.577.

29. CFYG 114.1247.

30. CFYG 145.1624; JWDS 42.577.

31. JWDS 42.577.

32. ZZTJ 277.9057, 9061.

revival.³³ The city of Changan was strategically important as well, due to proximity to the passes that access Sichuan. The assignment thus positioned Congke to play a leading role in any future showdown between the capital and the Shu governor. The western capital also had a venerable tradition of hereditary governors, making the new governor a potential threat to the capital.

In the midst of the political shakeup of the late spring of 931, the court tapped Meng Hu for arguably the most hazardous post in the capital, that of fiscal commissioner.³⁴ He seemed better suited than most candidates on the emperor's short list due to extensive experience under the previous administration. Military Commissioner Fan Yanguang, who like Meng Hu hailed from Weizhou, endorsed the appointment, a sign of his growing input on personnel matters. In the absence of a strong-willed colleague on the Military Commission, Yanguang's star would continue to rise, despite his limited political sensibilities and sometimes weak will.

The shakeup in the senior leadership also paved the way for the further rise of the eunuch Meng Hanqiong, in the fifth month of 931, with his posting as director of palace affairs (*zhi neishisheng*), responsible for the women's quarters and the eunuch staff within.³⁵ Hanqiong was raised as a slave of Wang Rong, the governor of Zhao, after which he worked closely with Zhuangzong on diplomacy and other matters. His wealth of experience and palace connections allowed Hanqiong to elude the extensive purge of eunuchs in the early months of Mingzong's reign. After initially denouncing eunuchs as a class, the monarch came to realize the value of individual eunuchs as representatives of palace interests, especially during negotiations with unruly governors, which allowed Hanqiong to evolve into an invaluable asset. The eunuch's ascent appears tied to his alliance with the Pure Consort Wang, in addition to the goodwill of imperial intimates like Zhu Hongzhao. In time, Hanqiong would amass a sizable fortune on behalf of the palace's women's quarters with little in the way of accountability. In the words of historian Sima Guang, "He was able to employ mandates from the Middle Palace to divert funds from the government treasury without authorization from either the Military Commission or the Three Fiscal Agencies. In the absence of written documentation, his exactions were beyond calculation."³⁶ Fortunately, the worst of his misdeeds did not emerge until the final years of the reign.

A succession of natural disasters added to court concerns in the winter of 931 to 932. A massive earthquake struck Jinyang at the outset of the tenth month of 931, the second in the span of four months, but this time the aftershocks persisted for several days. The earthquake left local officials "tongue-tied," sources say, worried about whether to reveal the true magnitude of the devastation to the court.³⁷ News of the

33. ZZTJ 277.9061.

34. JWDS 42.578, 69.917–18.

35. ZZTJ 277.9059; JWDS 42.578, 72.955.

36. ZZTJ 277.9059.

37. CFYG 101.1112.

tragedy at the Shatuo homeland produced a well of emotion in the monarch, who conducted prayers to the Gods of the Mountains and Hills (*jisi shanchuan*), an exercise likely of nomadic origins, while dispatching a personal emissary to inquire about conditions and console the populace.³⁸ Mingzong took the unusual step of conferring “ceremonial garb” (*zhangfu*) upon Li Xiang, his court rectifier who had alerted him to the severity of earthquake damage at Jinyang. In contrast, the city’s interim custodian, Feng Yun, whose memorial had intentionally prevaricated about quake damage, was quietly reassigned to Xuzhou. Through these two very different dispensations, Mingzong affirmed that his administration refused to countenance the suppression of information, the instinctive preference for officials confronting natural disasters or local disruptions. The court thereby exploited reportage on a single natural disaster to make a broader statement about official responsibility.

A solar eclipse was reported on the first day of the eleventh month (931.11.01), generally a cause for anxiety in the palace. Fortunately, the winter solstice followed five days later, which officials celebrated at the Wenming Palace. But by the end of the month, the Yellow River ruptured its dikes at Yunzhou to the east of the capital, apparently just before the winter freeze, destroying over four thousand homes. A month later, an earthquake of unspecified magnitude struck Qinzhou, a city close to the western capital.³⁹ The concentration of natural disasters in such a short timespan, and especially at sites of political or strategic import to the government, was surely seen as an ill omen. After all, relatively few disasters were reported in the early reign. The wrath of nature would certainly cause the monarch to turn more self-reflective and courtiers to attach greater symbolism to every action of the emperor and every major policy initiative of his administration.

* * *

Apart from the usual domestic concerns, the administration’s attention shifted to the western border that winter, and especially to the worsening relationship with the Tangut, who controlled a critical section of the Silk Road frequented by merchants and diplomats alike. Just as the country’s tributary system required cordial relations with the Tangut, the strategic interests of empire also demanded their cooperation, as the region was a major source of warhorses.⁴⁰ Military Commissioner Fan Yanguang, a man demonstrably less hawkish than his predecessor An Chonghui, alluded to the escalating border menace in a memorial: “The tribute of client-states have been repeatedly plundered by the Tangut, activity extending from Lingzhou to Binzhou

38. JWDS 42.583; CFYG 101.1112. *Wudai huiyao* gives the sixth month for the earthquake; see WDHY 10.172.

39. JWDS 42.584.

40. WDHY 29.463.

and Fangyuzhen.” Binzhou lies in close proximity to the western capital, Changan, suggesting that the Tangut menace now presented a direct threat to key cities within the Chinese interior. Yanguang’s memorial, which coincided with the peak of winter-time diplomatic activity, finished with a request for military intervention, suggesting a preeminent concern with diplomatic exchange.⁴¹

At the height of winter, the early days of 932, the court deployed a force of seven thousand against the Tangut, a combination of horsemen and infantry, led by Yao Yanchou and Kang Fu, the governors for Binzhou and Lingzhou, respectively. For a monarch given to a defensive posture on border affairs, the speed of Mingzong’s endorsement of the initiative is baffling. Perhaps he regarded the integrity of the tributary system as a vital interest. Or maybe, based on the small size of the force, seven thousand, he saw the intervention as chiefly a “police action” with the simple task of removing obstacles to trade and communications, rather than a “suppression” intended to exert direct control over a tributary-state. Regardless of the terminology employed, the reality was mini-war against the Tangut, a people known to have a stubborn streak, especially in their dealings with the Shatuo.

Late in the second month, news arrived about the initial victories in the offensive against Tangut bandits.⁴² Among the nineteen tribal groups accused of plundering tribute-bearing convoys headed to the capital, several thousand men and a similar number of domesticated animals were captured. Animals of the sort were valuable assets for the Tangut, so the seizure of several thousand head could have a significant economic impact. Tang armies had penetrated Tangut lands as far as Baiyu Ravine and liquidated numerous tribal groups, including the Amai. Government armies seized assorted objects once plundered by the bandits, including royal vestments for the sons of Mingzong intended as tribute to the court. At the insistence of the palace, such booty was retained by the occupying armies, in contravention of the prevailing rules of martial law that required scrupulous reversion to political authorities.

During the deployment of Kang Fu to the west, there were reports of a disturbance at his base of Lingzhou led by Xu Shenhuan, “a commander who had conspired to foment chaos.” Instability of the sort must have particularly alarmed Fu, the emperor’s foreign friend who had rallied hard to avoid the assignment. Local authorities somehow managed to suppress the insurgents long before reporting the case to Luoyang, confirming that the insurgency never posed a serious threat. The sudden outbreak of hostilities in an area formerly free of conflict suggests that the absence of the area’s military leadership had created a vacuum for opportunists. Moreover, the incident must have reminded the court of the potential perils of any police action in the borderlands—external gains must always be weighed against internal risks. The entire mission would come under heightened scrutiny as a consequence of the mutiny of Shenhuan.

41. ZZTJ 277.9064; JWDS 43.587.

42. JWDS 43.583; ZZTJ 277.9065; CFYG 168.1871.

At a time of heightened concern about border security, the Kitan turncoat, Li Zanhua, presented to the throne in the early months of 932, “A Map of Kitan Lands.” The map contained details on the geographic layout of his homeland, details of incalculable strategic value to the Later Tang military.⁴³ The ability of Zanhua to provide vital intelligence on Luoyang’s premiere rival to the north helps to explain Mingzong’s unique devotion to him.⁴⁴ As shown below, Zanhua’s defection had begun as a political embarrassment for the Kitan, but by now evolved into a source of potential vulnerability. The emperor continued to make much political capital of the defection, but courtiers were less effusive. Months later, Zanhua’s posting as governor of Huazhou met with stiff resistance from Fan Yanguang, the leading military commissioner, who remained skeptical about the loyalties of any man capable of repudiating family and country alike. He questioned Zanhua’s competence in office as well.⁴⁵ Mingzong slighted concerns of the sort, citing the need to be faithful to one’s promises in order to win future converts:

It was through Our fraternal alliance that Zanhua came to swear allegiance to this country. I am already old. But if later generations of rulers fail to uphold this commitment, then men of similar station will not defect in the future.⁴⁶

The credibility of the monarch and the state were at stake, which overrode lesser considerations like the candidate’s competence to serve. His predecessor was notorious for his empty promises, which seems to have informed Mingzong’s insistence on staying faithful to his promises.

Apart from loyalty to friends, the other endearing quality of Mingzong was his connection to the people. Toward the end of the third month of 932, he visited the suburbs of Luoyang to attend to an important ritual event, namely, “overseeing the tilling of land.” The event had been timed to coincide with the beginning of the farming season to convey the monarch’s veneration of agriculture as the source of the empire’s finances and the wheel around which its culture revolved. In passing through the suburbs, Mingzong’s eyes surveyed a father and two sons pulling plows with their own bodies. The inhumanity of their toil inspired him to confer three oxen, one for each man.⁴⁷ This particular act of charity seems altogether off-the-cuff, paralleling in some ways Mingzong’s special act of charity for the ailing Zheng Jue, his former councilor.

The monarch shifted from material conditions to the moral character of his subjects in an anecdote from the western capital, where the commoner Hou Kehong managed to dig from the walls of the nearby town four objects of jade, which he subsequently conveyed to the capital. The emperor, moved by Kehong’s selfless honesty, chose

43. JWDS 43.589.

44. See Chapter 6, pp. 160–61.

45. ZZTJ 277.9067.

46. JWDS 43.591; CFYG 170.1897.

47. JWDS 43.590.

to confer two hundred bolts of silk, two hundred strings of cash, and another two hundred rolls of silk gauze—more wealth than the peasant might have earned in a lifetime.⁴⁸ The story served as an instructional moment for the entire country, the poor elevating moral standards for the privileged, but it also played into the monarch's deftly crafted public image.

Even toward the end of the reign, the emperor continued to be concerned with the image of his court to the common people. After visiting the Longmen Buddhist caves in 932, Mingzong headed for the Yi River to inspect repair work on stone embankments damaged by recent floods. At the work site, he insisted upon stopping to share spirits from the imperial stock with ordinary workers, presumably engaging in casual conversation as well. It was a rare event in the history of a period dominated by men whose sense of privilege tended to separate them from the people. Days later, project overseers petitioned to extend the service duty for the construction workers by five days to allow completion of the project. Mingzong refused, insisting, "In the worst of winter's cold, we can hardly afford to squander the good faith of the common people [by demanding additional labor]!"⁴⁹ The extension of labor service was generally a routine matter handled by bureaucratic underlings and rarely rejected, especially for merely five days, but the monarch's personal exchange with workers had radically changed his response. Mingzong remained keenly aware of his duty as father and mother of the people in the Chinese tradition, while remaining a man of the people in the manner of Inner Asian leaders.

Mingzong insisted on acknowledging his unparalleled esteem for his councilor of long standing, Feng Dao, whom he dubbed "a truly genuine scholar-official" (*zhen shi-daifu*) in the early months of 932. He cited the admirable personal traits of the councilor that included sleeping on a straw mat or sharing meals with his servants.⁵⁰ Again, the monarch's compliment was intended to inspire a higher sense of moral character among Dao's peers in government. The palace further pressed the councilor about the causes behind the unseasonably heavy rains at Song, Hao, and Yong prefectures and the ideal response on his part: "The spring rains have proven especially heavy, preventing any clearing of the skies for a considerable time. May I know why?" The question allowed Dao to address broader issues of moral governance, while deflecting responsibility from the emperor to the administration in general and him in particular. His response appears consciously crafted to reassure a sovereign seen as overly anxious:

As a rule, it is part of Heaven's natural order for floods and droughts to occur out of season, but the presence of autumn-like phenomena in the late spring symbolizes our own failures as courtiers. We would prefer that Your Majesty focus on

48. JWDS 43.590.

49. JWDS 43.596–97.

50. CFYG 76.828.

augmenting and disseminating his charity and mercy. After all, persistent rains can hardly thwart Sagely governance.⁵¹

By attributing irregularities of nature to the natural order of things, Dao tried to move the monarch away from perceiving Heaven in the usual anthropomorphic way, a force embodied with human traits like anger that acts in constant reaction to human events. Sons of Heaven should devote their hearts to charity and mercy, leaving officials to manage day-to-day events.

The court dismissed Zhao Feng, its outspoken chief councilor, on the twenty-seventh day of the seventh month (932.07.27). Sources attribute his fall from grace to a long association with An Chonghui and impassioned defense of the commissioner in the face of baseless rumors, although other factors were likely involved as well.⁵² Over the course of his three-year tenure, Feng's devotion to humane and responsible governance served to reinvigorate the aging emperor, while his collaboration with Feng Dao provided a model for civility and circumspection among courtiers. Feng's rhetoric could be so impassioned as to force self-admonitions to flow from the emperor's lips, but such biting censure came as bitter medicine for the sovereign, who preferred the less confrontational style of Feng Dao. The bulk of Feng's duties at the History Bureau were now assumed by Li Yu.⁵³

It was during the tenth month of 932 that Mingzong had his fatherly conversation with eldest son Congrong about literacy and governance in the Middle Kingdom from the perspective of a minority ruler, the exchange cited in the Preface. According to an account preserved in the *Comprehensive Mirror*, the monarch worried over his son's penchant to surround himself with frivolous poets and other artists, a group led by Gao Nian, his son's "partner in song," but Congrong was not altogether blameless. At banquets, he liked to demand poems of his literary friends, which he would assess for quality, then toss substandard compositions onto the floor in condescension. His father raised his concerns in private conversation:

I may be illiterate, but I enjoy occasionally listening to scholars discuss the general meaning of the classics to increase my own knowledge. As I reflect on [my predecessor] Zhuangzong's fondness for poetic compositions, it seems that the sons of warriors can never be truly adept at the art, causing them to possibly incur the ridicule of others. Such things are scarcely worthy of emulation by you.⁵⁴

Unlike the earlier rendering of the exchange in the *Historical Records*, where the monarch seems displeased by his son's immersion in Chinese culture, this passage in the *Comprehensive Mirror* suggests simple concern for public embarrassment over being less than artful as writer. Moreover, this exchange between father and son limits

51. JWDS 43.590.

52. XWDS 29.310.

53. JWDS 43.594–95.

54. ZZTJ 278.9077.

imperial displeasure to the youth's literary interests, which the emperor regarded as inferior to the study of history and classics.

The provocative behavior of imperial son Congrong in the monarch's waning years left him increasingly unattractive as potential successor, at least in the eyes of dispassionate observers.⁵⁵ In the absence of a designated heir-apparent, three men saw themselves as credible candidates: biological sons Congrong and Conghou, youth barely twenty years in age, plus adopted son Congke, a man nearly thirty years older.⁵⁶ The current military commissioner, Fan Yanguang, never possessed the forceful personality of his predecessor that kept the imperial sons in line. After numerous frustrating attempts at censuring Congrong, efforts that produced no tangible results, the marginally literate Yanguang could no longer bear the young man's derisive words and disesteem.⁵⁷ He pleaded repeatedly for reassignment during the last years of the reign. Congrong also came into conflict with Shi Jingtang, the man married to Mingzong's eldest daughter, who was the offspring of Empress Cao. Congrong's birth mother was the deceased Woman Xia, a difference that seems to have complicated relations between the emperor's son and his son-in-law.⁵⁸ Jingtang began to petition for postings away from the capital as well, intent on avoiding potential conflict with the vexing son. The emperor had long ago insisted on Congrong's presence at daily audiences, hoping to improve his image at court, but the young man proceeded to alienate various interest groups, from imperial friends to the official rank-and-file.

Some months later, Mingzong finally acted on the further education of Congrong. Courtiers had privately anguished over the absence of a formal tutor for the young man, a matter raised four years earlier by Zhang Zhaoyuan, but they reportedly feared taking up the matter forthrightly with the throne for fear of the son's reaction. Courtiers thus employed the good services of Wang Jumin, overseer of the Household of the Heir-apparent, to petition for the nomination of a tutor, which resulted in the selection of Liu Zan, an executive at the Ministry of War. The advisors had cleverly cornered Congrong into endorsing the selection, but he rejected their preference as tutor and proposed instead Ren Zan. The emperor's nominee, Liu Zan, promptly petitioned to decline the assignment, ostensibly due to rumors of the son's opposition, although Congrong eventually relented under additional pressure. In this way, the court retained the services of Liu Zan, which must have seemed a positive turn from the perspective of courtiers, but the compromise only produced further frictions.

From the very outset, the new tutor Liu Zan clashed with Congrong, who indecorously "treated his mentor like the pettiest of underlings."⁵⁹ The youth began by

55. ZZTJ 278.9078–79; XWDS 51.577–78.

56. XWDS 51.578.

57. JWDS 97.1286; XWDS 51.578.

58. ZZTJ 278.9078.

59. ZZTJ 278.9083; JWDS 44.604; XWDS 15.163. The tutor's name is Ren Zan, not Liu Zan, according to XWDS. Another possibility is that Liu Zan and Ren Zan are two different people; see XWDS

insisting on restricting tutorials to once per month, and even then, sometimes directed bodyguards to deny the tutor access to his palace. On one occasion, he simply skipped a lecture, leaving the teacher waiting an entire day without bothering to explain his absence and without extending the courtesy of a meal. Liu Zan quickly found it impossible to function. Meanwhile, the tutor's tortured experience contributed to the worsening image of Congrong within official circles. In the words of the *Historical Records*, "Commanders, ministers and senior courtiers, bearing witness to Congrong's expanding power and position, in addition to improprieties of the sort, all recognized the peril presented by him, although no one dared to speak out."⁶⁰ The scandalous treatment of Liu Zan may have been common knowledge in the capital, but not necessarily where it mattered most, the palace. Meanwhile, by retaining the services of tutor Liu Zan against the resolute wishes of his son, Mingzong seems to have done serious damage to their relationship.

To escape his increasingly contentious domestic life, Mingzong hunted for a full day in Luoyang's southern suburbs late in the twelfth month of 932. He felled a deer on the run, confirmation of his sound physical condition for a man in his late sixties whose eyesight appears to have been only marginally diminished by age. Attendants concluded the event with a feast in the countryside, no doubt, roasting the dead animal. There are only nine hunts on record for the entire reign of Mingzong, events spread out rather evenly over the calendar. His predecessor hunted a total of twenty-four times during his brief three-year reign.⁶¹ In addition, Zhuangzong was fond of the sort of kickball popular in Inner Asia.⁶² The contrast in leisurely interests for the two monarchs may be partly attributable to age, as Mingzong was a generation older. In addition, the older man had other interests, including less vigorous exercises like visits to game parks. Finally, visits to farms, temples, work sites, and the homes of friends and associates made the social life for Mingzong perhaps the most diverse among the major rulers of the Five Dynasties.

* * *

The fourth year of Changxing turned out to be the final year of the sovereign's life, something no one could have anticipated at the outset, as the imperial calendar was crammed with the usual events, including a major shift in the senior civilian leadership. The palace announced the elevation of Liu Xu to chief councilor on the thirteenth day of the first month (933.01.13). The former Duanming academician, then nearly fifty,

28.316; JWDS 44.604–09, 68.907–08; WDHY 17.277; CFYG 709.8186.

60. XWDS 15.163.

61. CFYG 115.1261.

62. JWDS 32.445.

joined the seasoned but younger Feng Dao, a man of forty, and the political novice Li Yu. The shift left the civilian leadership more vulnerable in addressing the unexpected.

A map presented to the throne from Puzhou in the second month to mark completion of repairs to the city's embankments rekindled the monarch's memories of his long history in the armed forces. The map highlighted the names and locations of various strategic cities along the river, prompting Mingzong to recount nostalgically:

In assisting the Former Monarch to settle the world, I fought hundreds of battles big and small in trenches and fortifications exactly like these. . . . It still seems like yesterday. I can scarcely avoid melancholy in pondering the speed with which the last decade has passed!⁶³

The brevity of his seven years as emperor, in contrast with four decades as warrior, must have reinforced Mingzong's sense of displacement. He had adapted surprisingly well to the expectations of Chinese monarchy, despite his original ambivalence about assuming such weighty tasks.

In the third month of 933, news arrived from Tangut lands of the recent death of Li Renfu, the region's aging governor. Several senior courtiers at Luoyang had suspected the Tangut leader of colluding with the Kitan, their historic ally against the Shatuo, so his death came as something of a relief to Later Tang policymakers. But the installation of his son, Li Yichao, as assistant commander without authorization from Luoyang triggered a lively debate about the best way forward in dealing with a region that had long frustrated governments of the Middle Kingdom due to the hereditary nature of regional power and the inability of local leaders to control unruly confederations within their own backyard.⁶⁴ In effect, the court needed to balance policy ideals of responsibility to the center against on-the-ground realities of entrenched power. Mingzong responded boldly by mandating Yichao's redeployment to the Chinese interior, Yanzhou (modern Yan'an, Shaanxi), fully aware that he was meddling in the internal affairs of another border people. Yichao waited a full month before spurning the mandate on the grounds of pressures within. "The masses of this region along with its military leadership refuse to part with me," he insisted. Other chieftains in the region, swayed by his emotional appeal and anxious to protect their own autonomy, soon rallied to his cause, which immediately complicated the court's mission.⁶⁵

The newly emboldened Tangut armies had expanded eastward to harass Yanzhou by the end of the fourth month of 933, "plundering provision lines and seizing the equipment needed to besiege the city."⁶⁶ They were laying the groundwork for a preemptive offensive against the Chinese interior and were certain to perform well in their initial thrust due to familiarity with the region. The Tanguts also managed to defend their

63. JWDS 44.602.

64. ZZTJ 278.9082.

65. JWDS 44.604.

66. JWDS 44.604.

stronghold at Xiazhou, where the heavy bombardment of Later Tang armies never proceeded beyond the city's outer wall, ramparts composed of materials unfamiliar to those outside, including "a core of white earth so dense that it could not be breached by ordinary weapons."⁶⁷ The Chinese use of asbestos is well documented in the Song period, but the quotation above suggests that it remained largely unfamiliar to the Middle Kingdom during the Five Dynasties. Luoyang unleashed suppression armies led by Yao Yanchou and An Congjin, men initially sent to facilitate Yichao's relocation to the interior. They led a force of reportedly fifty thousand, which performed poorly against the Tangut leader, despite the numerical superiority of Later Tang armies. Confronted with a possible stalemate, the court began a speedy review of its options. Fan Yanguang had been the leading advocate of aggression, but in all likelihood, the emperor was the leading force in the review.

Less than two months into the intervention in the northwest, late in the fifth month of 933, Mingzong reversed course to order an immediate withdrawal of Later Tang armies from Xiazhou. He was mindful of Li Yichao's glib warning at the outset: "The area has little to offer your kingdom to justify the high cost of the campaign, but it is on behalf of my ancestors that I defend this small strip of land, the loss of which is simply unbearable."⁶⁸ Mingzong must have also reflected upon the Shatuo defense of their own stronghold at Jinyang several decades earlier in the face of successive sieges by the Liang dynasty, the Shatuo prevailing over vastly superior firepower. He appreciated intuitively the mentality of resistance against distant authorities that empowers the underdog, the same dynamic that had empowered minorities against majority will in China's borderlands for centuries. The embarrassing end to the war against the tiny state of Nanping likely weighed heavily on the minds of decision-makers as well, where another diminutive but feisty opponent, as shown below, had managed to defy the Middle Kingdom to win the battle of face, despite losing the war of arms.⁶⁹

The palace summoned officials in the capital for the usual celebration, after announcing the withdrawal of suppression forces from the northwest, festivities that included a generous round of rewards, ignoring their lackluster performance in the field. But as noted by commentators in the *Comprehensive Mirror*, "rewarding armies in the absence of victory only serves to instill insolence in the ranks."⁷⁰ Much like blanket pardons for criminals, imperial largesse for undeserving armies would come to represent a serious shortcoming for the administration in its final years, a shortcoming with unforeseen implications for governing the country in the emperor's absence.

The monarch began the fifth month of 933 with formal audience in the celebrated Wenming Hall. He appears at this point newly committed to comprehensive honors

67. See footnotes in ZZTJ 278.9085.

68. ZZTJ 278.9085.

69. On the Nanping war, see Chapter 6, pp. 162–64.

70. ZZTJ 278.9085.

for the younger members of the royal family. Adopted son Congke was invested Prince of Lu and younger son Congyi, the youth raised by Consort Wang but born to another consort, was invested Prince of Xu. The two adult daughters of the emperor then alive were further elevated to the Shou'an Princess and the Yongle Princess.⁷¹ Two nephews received investitures as well, Congzhang as Prince of Yang and Congmin as Prince of Jing, while adopted son Congwen was invested as Prince of Yan. The men also received postings as governors. A month earlier, after nearly a year of deliberations between the court and the palace, Mingzong finally elevated Woman Xia, the deceased mother of his two eldest surviving sons, as "empress." The long delay between the original announcement and the final conferral suggests tensions at the highest level over the appropriate title for a woman who had never been the formal spouse of Mingzong, the emperor likely acting on the sentiments of his children.⁷² Later, the "actual fiefs of maintenance" (*shi shifeng*) for eldest son Congrong, the basis for his stipend, were increased to two thousand households. In contrast, the fiefs of maintenance for younger son Conghou were much smaller, one thousand households, even though the men were close in age.⁷³ The discrepancy seemed to confirm the superior standing of Congrong as potential successor.⁷⁴

The emperor of sixty-seven *sui* embarked upon an outing on the ninth day of the fifth month (933.05.09) that ended tragically for him and created hysteria across the capital on short order. He had visited the Jiuqu Springs in the suburbs of Luoyang to escape an early summer heat spell and lingered at a nearby tower to savor the scenery, subsequently returning to his palace with apoplexy (*fengji*).⁷⁵ He recovered slightly after seven days of bed rest, then suffered a relapse that persisted throughout the sixth month. When he returned to court a month later, a visibly fatigued Mingzong was clearly unfit to resume normal duties.⁷⁶ In slighting the importance of his own health to dynastic fortunes, the emperor had forgotten a highly prescient remonstrance from Chief Councilor Feng Dao nearly three years earlier.

At that time, Mingzong had just returned from a trip to the Longmen caves in the early winter and suffered from exposure. After recuperation, he expressed renewed interest in traveling even farther afield, prompting Dao to invoke the popular idiom about a horse trip as a parable for any high-risk behavior that might imperil the emperor's personal safety and ultimately jeopardize the highly vulnerable enterprise of dynasty, where transitions in power invariably instill insecurities in the country's subjects:

71. JWDS 44.605.

72. JWDS 43.588, 44.603–04, 49.676; ZZTJ 278.9084.

73. JWDS 44.605.

74. JWDS 44.604.

75. JWDS 44.604; ZZTJ 278.9084

76. ZZTJ 278.9084.

In the absence of domestic worries, Your Majesty should feel free to visit nearby sites. But in the unlikely event that your horse should stumble while traipsing across perilous mountains, the matter would become my worry as your subject. As the idiom goes, “A son worth a *thousand* ounces in gold does not risk injury to his person by standing too closely to the banister of a stairway. Similarly, the son worth a *hundred* ounces in gold does not risk harm by leaning too heavily against a railing.” How even more weighty should be considerations for someone like the Son of Heaven, whose value is beyond measure? Your Majesty can ill afford to be so indifferent to your physical well-being!⁷⁷

The statement is a reminder that the sovereign is no mere mortal and the preeminent responsibility of courtiers involves minimizing risk to his person. In traditional China, injuries caused by falling from a horse were as common as automobile accidents today, the risks rising with age as a consequence of declining agility. Due to a highly active lifestyle, the monarch likely looked much younger than his years, but in this case appearances were deceptive.

Following his affliction with apoplexy, Emperor Mingzong’s absence from court in the early summer began to create hysteria in Luoyang, “as untold numbers of ordinary residents absconded for the surrounding wildness, while literati sought sanctuary in military barracks [for fear of mutiny],” reports the *Comprehensive Mirror*.⁷⁸ The passage suggests that the emperor’s condition had become common knowledge in the capital, reports that surely stirred up recollections of seven years earlier, after the slaying of Zhuangzong, when the Palace Guard ransacked Luoyang for an entire day before the armies of Mingzong could arrive. Civilian leaders were the least inclined to regard military barracks as safe places, but clearly greater peril lurked elsewhere.

Sensitive to the growing anxieties of his subjects, Mingzong insisted on holding audience at the Guangshou Palace early in the sixth month of 933, but his perceptibly frail condition prompted a brief return to the residence at the prodding of courtiers. Mingzong would hear nothing of it, “I can approximate good health by simply sitting on a sofa.”⁷⁹ A second concession most likely involved changing from formal costumes into casual outfits. To lend the appearance of normalcy, the emperor proceeded with the usual business of governance, including rotations for a group of military men and the posting of several senior officers in the Palace Guard.⁸⁰

Despite his declining physical condition, Mingzong was compelled to address complaints in the seventh month about the misconduct of Li Zanhua, the Kitan turncoat appointed governor of Huazhou.⁸¹ Months earlier, Zanhua had abandoned his

77. The passage reads, “*Qianjin zhi zi, zuo bu chui tang; baijin zhi zi, li bu yi beng*” 千金之子，坐不垂堂。百金之子，立不倚衡; see JWDS 41.570.

78. ZZTJ 278.9084.

79. CFYG 58.616.

80. JWDS 44.605.

81. On the defection of Li Zanhua, see Chapter 6, pp. 160–61.

command without authorization to begin an extended stay in Luoyang, his preferred place of abode as an aficionado of Chinese culture, insisting, “Your Subject is a military man who finds service in the locales utterly unpalatable. Life in the capital is more to my liking, so I beg that Your Majesty consider a posting in the Palace Guard.” Prior to receiving the petition, Mingzong had learned of the Kitan’s abysmal record at Huazhou in the past year, where he had alienated the civilian and military leaderships alike. The emperor initially acquiesced partly out of commiseration with Zanhua’s hapless colleagues at Huazhou and partly out of personal obligation. His response reveals heartfelt frustrations at having expected too much of his foreign friend:

You obviously have an aversion to serving as governor, so I will respect your wishes, while permitting your retention of full stipend and official perquisites. The locales cannot do without governors, but I can always find others to assume duties of the sort.⁸²

Political payoffs for proven incompetents was precisely the sort of indulgence resisted by An Chonghui in the past, especially when compensation was separated from performance. Moreover, military officers were rarely allowed to preselect their own postings, and Zanhua had specifically requested a commission in the Palace Guard. Several months later, the court announced his reassignment to Qianzhou, a city near the capital, allowing Zanhua to continue his residence in Luoyang, while presiding nominally as governor.⁸³ It seemed the right compromise from the monarch’s perspective: he remained faithful to a pledge and Zanhua never assumed his preferred posting in the Palace Guard, where the potential ramifications of ineptitude were infinitely greater.

Over the course of the eighth month of 933, three statesmen of sufficient stature expired to prompt a suspension of audience. In the past, such deaths tended to be spread out rather evenly over any given year, never exceeding two per month, so the concentration of three deaths in the eighth month surely reminded the always superstitious and now ailing emperor of his own mortality. Included among the men commemorated was Gao Ke, one-time director of the palace library.⁸⁴ Mingzong seemed sufficiently robust to relax at the Zhide Palace, his suburban residence, toward the end of the eighth month. He returned to the same venue five days later, likely finding its intimate spaces and sprawling gardens better suited to rest and recovery.⁸⁵ As his carriage made its way through the suburbs, ordinary residents of the city cheered him on, “lining both sides of the road and blocking his path.” It was a spontaneous statement of popular goodwill, the cheers of commoners interlaced with worries about their own future in his absence.⁸⁶ Mingzong repeated the trip days later, his entourage spurred

82. CFYG 48.519.

83. JWDS 44.607.

84. JWDS 44.606.

85. JWDS 44.606.

86. CFYG 114.1247.

on this time by a mixed crowd of officials and commoners. He had only been an occasional visitor to the Zhide Palace in years past, making the recent spate of trips a source of concern for persons familiar with his routine.

In the face of his deteriorating health, Mingzong devoted much of the late summer trying to unleash every conceivable supernatural force to extend his life while simultaneously marshaling every political force to immortalize his deeds on earth. He added to his already long titular name the following four characters, “The Monarch of Expansive Destiny Modeled on Heaven” (*Guang yun fa tian*). He now had “destiny” on his side. Mingzong also summoned a succession of medicine men and spiritual leaders, including a well-known monk from the holy mountain of Taishan in modern Shandong, whose glaring incompetence created a public spectacle in the end.⁸⁷ The episode marks the monarch’s heightened gullibility with regards to religious eccentrics. The palace announced a general amnesty upon the return of Mingzong to court in the final days of the eighth month, including pardons for some criminal elements excluded from former amnesties. It stands as the most sweeping act of imperial clemency for the entire reign and surely caused alarm in some circles, in light of the admonitions of Kang Cheng against the practice, as seen below.⁸⁸

The emperor seems to have tried to divert the court’s attention away from his health by advancing eldest son Li Congrong to the highest titular post in the military, namely, Grand Commander-in-chief for the World (*Tianxia bingma da yuanshuai*) with additional powers as overseer of the armed forces in the capital. The advancement in the eighth month of 933 triggered a lively debate about the meaning of the title “Grand Commander for the World,” a title never conferred upon an imperial prince under the present dynasty. Courtiers also discussed the proper protocol for treating such men, after which Congrong was allowed to stand in front and separate from officials during audience formation. In the past, he had simply stood to the foreground of chief counselors. Ironically, the panoply of new titles pleased no one: they likely disappointed Congrong, who preferred to have his inheritance confirmed, while they displeased senior courtiers forced to stand to the rear of the youth during daily audience, a man still unpopular among officials.

Earlier in the eighth month of 933, after years of dodging the sensitive issue of succession, a deputy chamberlain for the imperial stud, He Ze, petitioned for the formal installation of Congrong as heir to the throne. The imperial stud should have been an unlikely source for the proposal, but in some ways the deputy chamberlain was forced to intercede by default due to inaction by individuals higher up the bureaucratic chain. As an officer in the agency supplying horses for palace occupants, He Ze presumably interacted informally with members of the imperial family during trips in and around the capital, and was a man seen as a friend of the palace. But the plea instantly riled the

87. JWDS 44.605–06.

88. On Kang Cheng’s memorial, see Chapter 5, pp. 130–31.

ailing Mingzong, who exclaimed tearfully, “The official multitudes seek to install an heir-apparent, allowing me to live out my last days at the family compound in Taiyuan.” Oddly enough, the monarch had equated installation of an heir with abdication of the throne. He then reluctantly summoned leading courtiers to explore the matter, but the deliberations proved inconclusive. For many insiders, pressing the monarch at such a vulnerable moment was poor form. Worse yet, a growing minority had come to favor breaking with Chinese tradition by elevating the more personable younger son, Conghou, to the throne. The proposed action was hardly without precedent in China, although the most prominent case in Mingzong’s life had involved the Kitan succession, where the eldest son of Abaoji, Tuyu, had been supplanted by the decidedly more able younger son, Yelü Deguang, prompting Tuyu to defect to the Middle Kingdom. Breaking with tradition involved too many imponderables. But the longer the emperor dickered over installing Congrong, the more he seemed prepared to make an unconventional choice.

The response of the eldest son to the petition was even more surprising. He rushed to the palace for a face-to-face meeting with his father to lobby against his own installation. “I hear that some sinister men wish to elevate me to heir-apparent,” Congrong said, feigning surprise. “As a young man, I would rather concentrate on applying myself to managing matters of civil and military governance. I do not covet the title in the least!” The words were intended to console the emperor, but they accomplished little. Congrong then proceeded to the offices of the Military Commission to confront Fan Yanguang and Zhao Yanshou, whom he deduced were the real backers of the proposal: “In pressing for my investiture as heir-apparent, you gentlemen obviously want my military commands stripped away and my movements confined to the eastern palace.”⁸⁹ The “eastern palace” is the official residence of the heir-apparent, located in a secure place within the imperial compound, whereas Congrong currently resided in the city of Luoyang as the city’s chief administrator. Ironically, the absence of a title allowed for greater freedom of movement.

The young man’s fear of confinement seems far-fetched at first glance, but he clearly understood the depths of his father’s resistance to formalizing his status. The attribution of the petition to “sinister men” seems a gross mischaracterization of the drive to fix the succession, a drive that likely emanated from many quarters, not merely the Military Commission. In light of Mingzong’s illicit path to power, Congrong had to avoid any appearance of manipulating his father’s inner circle to speak for him. Nor could he afford, as Grand Commander for the armed forces, the appearance of manipulating the military for political gain. As for Mingzong, the assumption that naming an heir was tantamount to abdicating powers must be understood in the context of early Tang history, where the second emperor, Taizong, forced his father to abdicate, after which the deposed emperor lived for years under house arrest. Abdications in

89. ZZTJ 278.9087; XWDS 15.165.

China generally derived from incompetence, incapacity, or intrigue, conditions absent in this case. Meanwhile, for a man experiencing a precipitous decline in health, the installation of an heir was tantamount to accepting death. For now, no action would take place on installing an heir.

Emperor Ming assumed a truncated court agenda in the ninth month of 933, after a modest recovery, bestowing additional honors on his inner circle led by Chief Councilor Feng Dao and Military Commissioner Fan Yanguang. In this way, he sought to consolidate their control over the civil and military services and position them to preside over the next transfer of imperial powers. He may have also informed them of his preference for the succession, although there is no evidence of a written will to provide political cover should a challenge emerge from the losing side. In reality, Yanguang had grown frustrated with the political posturing of not only the eldest son but the powerful Consort Wang, who clearly had her own preferences in terms of the succession. The challenges before Yanguang were immense.⁹⁰ To stabilize the economy at this time of change, the court installed Jinyang native Feng Yun as its fiscal commissioner. As for buttressing the loyalties of the military elite, Mingzong conferred councilor powers upon commanders Kang Yicheng and Zhang Qianzhao.⁹¹

In the face of successive petitions from senior members of the administration to resign due to political uncertainties, the palace recruited a new member for his Military Commission in the ninth month of 933, longtime associate Zhu Hongzhao, the same governor who had turned state's evidence against An Chonghui two years earlier. Before long, Hongzhao would similarly petition to leave the commission, referring to himself "as bereft of native talent as well as strategic sensibilities." His self-deprecating utterances were more desperation than humble pie, as he sensed a power struggle ahead capable of eclipsing the showdown between the sons of Keyong over seven years earlier. The request from yet another senior military leader caused Mingzong to bristle, "You gentlemen wish to abandon me out of fear for what lies immediately ahead. For what purpose did I nurture you over these many years?"⁹² The despair in his voice caused Hongzhao to withdraw his petition. Others proved more craven.

By the early winter, Fan Yanguang would add to the turmoil by resigning as military commissioner, effective on the seventeenth day of the month of the tenth month (933.10.17). He subsequently moved north to the Zhenzhou governorship. Yanguang had acknowledged from the outset his sense of being "overwhelmed by the weighty duties of office," due to inexperience in the capital, and indeed he paled in comparison to An Chonghui, but rising tensions with Congrong was likely the immediate trigger.⁹³ Yanguang's replacement became Fiscal Commissioner Feng Yun, an old but less

90. JWDS 44.6006–07, 97.1286; XWDS 51.578; ZZTJ 278.9087–89.

91. JWDS 44.607.

92. CFYG 78.844.

93. CFYG 78.847.

than artful imperial intimate. The monarch tapped Sun Yue, a regional governor with a similarly short political résumé, to replace Yun as fiscal commissioner.⁹⁴ The sudden surge in resignations forced Emperor Mingzong to lower expectations in finding replacements, unwittingly handicapping his successor from the outset.

In advance of Fan Yanguang's departure from Luoyang, Mingzong presided over a banquet in his honor and used the occasion to solicit a candid assessment of current affairs: "As you prepare to leave for distant parts, you should be exhaustive in expressing yourself on matters of governance." Yanguang rendered a cautionary response, but sadly, one too ambiguous to be actionable in the short-term. He replied, "As pertains to the most urgent matters before us, I trust that Your Majesty will consult a broad spectrum of officials from the inner and outer courts [that is, military commissioners and chief councilors], while ignoring the utterances of untold numbers of petty men."⁹⁵ Concern with expanding the sources of bureaucratic input suggests a perception that Mingzong had drawn upon a narrower body of less distinguished advisors in recent years to the detriment of decision-making. The petty men referenced in Yanguang's comments apparently gravitated around the eunuch Meng Hanqiong, who in turn represented palace women. With the onset of illness a half-year ago, Mingzong had found himself dependent on the eunuch to liaise with courtiers and the military, unintentionally augmenting Hanqiong's already considerable powers.⁹⁶ The palace faction had effectively outmaneuvered Yanguang and forced his departure in frustration. He and the emperor nonetheless parted in tears as a consequence of mutual affections.

The eleventh month of 933 began with the usual postings of civil and military officials, including Lu Zhi as right rectifier (*you puye*), which suggests enough vigor on Mingzong's part to review documents. His condition deteriorated rapidly, however, by the middle of the month, causing attendants to move him from the elegant Guangshou Palace to the modestly appointed Yonghe Palace, where he was confined to bed. The only adult son residing in the capital at the time, Congrong, had learned from caregivers that his father could no longer recognize others, likely due to the severe headaches and double vision associated with apoplexy. The son also learned from informants that attendants at the palace had begun to wail uncontrollably, prompting Congrong to conclude that his father had already expired. In reality, he had regained consciousness in the early hours of the subsequent morning, surrounded by consorts and workers from across the Six Palaces, who congratulated him for not "giving up the ghost."⁹⁷ By some miracle, Mingzong had managed to survive his closest brush with death thus far, although few outside the imperial compound knew of his improved condition.

94. JWDS 44.607–08.

95. ZZTJ 278.9090–91; CFYG 111.1209.

96. CFYG 58.616; *Beimeng suoyan* 20.355.

97. JWDS 44.609; XWDS 15.159; ZZTJ 278.9091.

Congrong did not make the short trip to the palace on the eighteenth day to inquire of the monarch's condition (933.11.18), as propriety dictated, employing illness as pretext. He instead laid plans to deploy his own armies to occupy the Inner City, convinced that key advisers were opposed to his succession, even though his principal detractor, Fan Yanguang, had already left the capital. Over the course of the day, the imperial son apprised Military Commissioner Zhu Hongzhao of his plans to occupy the imperial compound, information intended to preclude interception by the Palace Guard. Hongzhao's response proved predictably cautionary: "Our Sage Monarch continues to be blessed with life. As for the Prince, he should exert his instincts as loyal subject and filial son, while refraining from acting precipitately."⁹⁸ But another military insider, Kang Yicheng, seems to have been more amenable to the son's aggressive posturing: "If you come to the palace, we will embrace you." Yicheng's son had been assigned to units at Henan prefecture under the direct control of Congrong, so his judgment had been impaired by personal considerations.⁹⁹ In the interim, the hostile rhetoric of Congrong escalated into outright threats to the lives of resisters and their families. The new threats compelled Hongzhao to confront Yicheng, his counterpart in the armed forces, while drawing in the eunuch Meng Hanqiong, who similarly pressed for action against the son: "Today's incident presents a potential threat to our Sovereign Father. How can we concern ourselves with personal benefit?"¹⁰⁰ The eunuch's words swayed his comrades, although by then, Congrong had already directed over a thousand guardsmen to the Tianjin Bridge, which lies adjacent to the southern wall of the Forbidden City.

It was ultimately the eunuch Meng Hanqiong who took the initiative to apprise the bedridden Mingzong and the Pure Consort Wang of the treachery underway: "Congrong has rebelled, his armies now attacking the Duan Gates. If he succeeds in entering the palace, the ensuing tumult will be incalculable!" Mingzong initially found the news too incredible. He had been a good father, neither unduly stern nor aloof to the young man. Grandson Li Chongji, the offspring of adopted son Congke, concurred, "In undertaking today's sedition, Congrong must have come under the sway of others."¹⁰¹ The monarch nonetheless mustered the strength to deploy Kang Yicheng to oversee the final suppression of his reign, this time against his own flesh and blood. He also dispatched other palace aides and family members, including grandson Chongji, to secure the eleven exterior gates of the Forbidden City and prevent penetration by outsiders. In private conversation with Chongji, the emperor confessed to embarrassment at overestimating the abilities of Congrong. He stated, "I always suspected that the likes of that young man could not possibly manage the weighty

98. JWDS 44.608–09; XWDS 15.165–66; ZZTJ 278.9092.

99. ZZTJ 278.9092.

100. ZZTJ 278.9093.

101. ZZTJ 278.9093; Zhang Qifan, *Wudai jinjun*, p. 49.

duties of sovereignty. I should have entrusted military power to your father [Congke] instead.”¹⁰² A dying Mingzong was clearly acknowledging his superior faith in Congke, the adopted son whom he had nearly killed. This dastardly turn of events would highlight the problem of succession politics in the Middle Kingdom—entrusting dynastic fortunes to untested youth.

In dispatching the commanders responsible for disposing of the insurgents, Mingzong spoke with an air of inexplicable calm, especially in light of the life-and-death consequences of his charge: “Please dispose of the matter on your own without alarming the people.”¹⁰³ In other words, the armed forces were authorized to restore order at any cost, including liquidation of the son, without consulting the palace. Contingents led by Congrong had somehow managed to reach the gates of the Forbidden City on the twentieth day of the eleventh month (933.11.20), only to be overwhelmed by a vastly superior counterforce led by Meng Hanqiong.¹⁰⁴ Congrong withdrew after a brief and futile engagement with palace security, ultimately perishing in his Luoyang offices in the company of his wife, Woman Liu, and a small boy.¹⁰⁵ The bedridden monarch moved quickly to punish his son in death by stripping away royal titles and relegating him to commoner status. But the usual retribution for treasonous subjects, exposing the head in the marketplace, was waived in this case. Mingzong was inclined to be even more charitable toward Congrong’s sole survivor, a small boy who lived in the imperial compound. Commanders enjoined the palace to liquidate the child as dictated by law, but Mingzong pushed back: “Of what crime is he guilty?” Only days later did the palace consent to executing the boy, under additional pressure from military aides. The anguish of slaying one’s own grandson mere days after the deaths of the boy’s father and mother can well be imagined.¹⁰⁶ Throughout his life, Mingzong was loath to indulge in acts of violent retribution, so slaying the child ran against his instincts as both father and sovereign.

A generation earlier, in 912, the founder of the Liang dynasty, Zhu Wen, had succumbed to the intrigues of his own son, Zhu Yougui, the product of an amorous affair. The younger man exploited the father’s infirmity to overrun palace security and disembowel Wen in his own bed. Yougui subsequently succeeded as emperor, although his reign ended a half-year later after the military rallied around a legitimate son, Zhu Youzhen (Emperor Mo), who proceeded to reign for a decade.¹⁰⁷ Congrong of the Later Tang seemed poised to repeat history on two scores, the patricide of Yougui in 912 and the regicide of his father against Zhuangzong in 926. However, the cases of Zhu Wen and Li Siyuan differed in one important regard, namely, vastly disparate

102. ZZTJ 278.9093.

103. ZZTJ 278.9093.

104. Wang Gungwu, *The Structure of Power in North China*, p. 160.

105. XWDS 15.166.

106. ZZTJ 278.9094.

107. JWDS 7.108–10; XWDS 13.136–38; ZZTJ 268.8758–60.

degrees of loyalty within the civil and military services. The Liang founder won the world by bullying the military into submission, whereas Mingzong rose to power on the back of the military, as a consequence of a commanding presence on the front lines of war for nearly three decades.

Upon learning of the final dispensation for Congrong, the grief-stricken father collapsed on his couch and fell unconscious. His first utterances upon regaining consciousness were “I am now the Liu Rengong [of our time],” referring to the hapless satrap at Yan, who had been incarcerated by his own son two decades earlier.¹⁰⁸ The statement suggests that the monarch suspected Congrong of intending to imprison him in the manner of Liu Rengong. Even in his last days, he refused to believe that the son was capable of committing the heinous act of regicide like Zhu Yougui. Curiously, the palace had never insisted that suppression armies capture Congrong alive, so the son’s real intentions will never be known because the emperor preferred ignorance in this case.

Feng Dao and a coterie of other courtiers appeared at the Yonghe Palace on the twenty-first day of the eleventh month (933.11.21), where the emperor had been recuperating in recent weeks. After exchanging the standard greetings, they provided a briefing on the successful conclusion of the suppression effort against Congrong in less than a day. Mingzong’s physical condition had improved enough to permit movement beyond the royal bedroom. But once the gathering seemed to assume a celebratory tone, he soberly interjected, “We are embarrassed to meet subjects like you, in the face of such appalling family strife!”¹⁰⁹ Mingzong had failed as a father, but he was savvy enough to appreciate the wider impact of palace intrigue in his final days upon his place in history. The chronicles of his reign, up to this point, had been replete with good intentions and sound policies on his part and little in the way of internecine feuds, especially within the royal family. The sinister deed of a single son would cast its ugly pall over the entire reign. Gingerly, Dao embraced the exasperated Mingzong, the lapels of both men wet with tears. The dynasty would now be remembered by its violent transitions: Mingzong’s purge of Zhuangzong at the outset and his son’s attempt to depose him at the end.

As the monarch lay gravely ill in the last days of the eleventh month, some senior aides acting on his behalf lavished material rewards upon the civil and military officials involved in restoring order, a group led by Kang Yicheng, who salvaged his career by repudiating Congrong mere moments before he turned his armies on the palace. Honors also went to martyrs like Fiscal Commissioner Sun Yue. Punishments followed for associates of the mutinous son, including permanent exiles for eight men, a combination of civil and military officials, who had worked under Congrong at the Henan prefectural seat; the group included even the tutor appointed by the palace, Liu

108. *Beimeng suoyan* 20.355.

109. CFYG 47.511; ZZTJ 278.9094.

Zan. All eight men were stripped of *literati* status as well. A slightly larger group of military officers were dismissed from office or subject to other forms of retribution after being implicated indirectly in the affair. The amorphousness of these two target groups seemed problematic to seasoned courtiers Feng Dao and Feng Yun, who pointed to their superficial association with Congrong in the past. Military Commissioner Zhu Hongzhao had been the principal proponent of comprehensive retribution, no doubt embarrassed for having initially coddled the former prince, but he relented under pressure from colleagues concerned about a potential backlash.¹¹⁰

Anxious about the well-being of his remaining son, Conghou, Mingzong dispatched the eunuch Meng Hanqiong to Weizhou on the twenty-second day of the eleventh month (933.11.22). Conghou's safety was essential to securing the imperial succession and Hanqiong was deemed the most reliable custodian for the empire's most important asset. In the interim, Mingzong turned to grandson Chongji, the twenty-something offspring of adopted son Congke, to assist with his own personal security in the absence of the palace's senior eunuch.¹¹¹ The tribulations of recent days had proven sufficiently stressful to further compromise Mingzong's health and force his confinement to family quarters once again. Conghou would reach the capital on the twenty-eighth day (933.11.28), but Mingzong had already expired two days earlier, the twenty-sixth day—December 15, 933 on the Julian calendar—at sixty-seven *sui*, or sixty-six years old by Western reckoning.¹¹² A short six days had elapsed since Congrong's assault on the palace, an event that seems to have sapped Mingzong of the will to live.

The burial of Mingzong in the suburbs of Luoyang came five months later, toward the end of the fourth month of 934, his mausoleum given the name Huiling or "Regal Tumulus." His final title of honor, the "Sagaciously Virtuous, Amicably Martial, and Reverentially Filial Emperor," aptly conveyed the principles for which he stood in life.¹¹³ Sometime before his death, the decision had been made to bury him in the suburbs of Luoyang, like his predecessor Zhuangzong, not the gravesite of his ancestors in northern Hedong, which had been embellished with shrines and ritual paraphernalia during the reign. Mingzong had come to terms with his calling as Emperor of China for whom final interment in the historic heartland was both an honor and a duty.

110. JWDS 44.609–10; ZZTJ 278.9094–95.

111. ZZTJ 278.9093.

112. Commentators on the *Comprehensive Mirror* note that Mingzong should rightfully be considered sixty-eight *sui*, having celebrated his birthday two months before death; see ZZTJ 278.9095.

113. JWDS 44.610.

Chapter 5

Institutions, Reforms, and Political Culture

Governing Officials

Imperial Beneficence

The Son of Heaven reached out to civilian courtiers from the very outset of the reign, an effort that continued to varying degrees until the end. Late in the fifth month of 926, his first month in power, Mingzong employed a sealed envelope to announce the launching of a special audience every five days in the Interior Palace (*neidian*), a more intimate space, to facilitate informal exchanges with leading political and military advisors, including direct questions from the emperor. He apparently disliked the rather passive format of formal audiences, where assemblies and reports consumed much of the time.¹ The court also designated the Wenming Palace as the site for regular audiences in the future. The venue was popular with his predecessor for special events such as investitures, presumably due its spacious elegance.² The regular audience thereby retained its traditional structure. In addition, the monarch extended invitations to the palace's expansive porches for "a meal with a view" (*langcan*) on the first and fifteenth days of each month, invitations that included light food and beverages, plus casual conversation.³ Historians attribute the provision of refreshments to the inadequacy of official compensation, but coming in the middle of summer, the well-being of officials under the stress of Luoyang's oppressive heat likely provided a more compelling reason to encourage a midday siesta. Sources fail to specify which group or groups were included in the noontime event, although the allusion to "inadequate compensation" for some participants suggests the presence of lesser officials.

The palace announced in the early months of the reign a special perquisite for metropolitan officials, namely, a horse and a donkey for each civil and military official, a group of perhaps several thousand, apparently to facilitate their movement in and out of the city.⁴ The Luo River ran through the heart of the capital, with imperial palaces

1. JWDS 36.496; CFYG 108.1176; WDHY 5.87–88, 6.93–94; ZZTJ 275.8988.

2. JWDS 31.432.

3. JWDS 36.499.

4. JWDS 36.497.

situated north of the river and official buildings and residences clustered mostly in the south, so perhaps the conferral allowed officials to keep an extra horse north of the river to shorten travel time to the Forbidden City. Residents needed donkeys for travel within the city and horses for travel to the suburbs and beyond. As an infrequent capital in Tang times, Luoyang had a higher number of officials without permanent residences in or near the city, making for special needs in terms of local transportation.⁵

An audience on the first day of the tenth month (926.10.01), the beginning of winter by the lunar calendar, provided the occasion for Mingzong to address current policy toward outfitting metropolitan officials with seasonable uniforms. After consulting aides, he initially pledged to provide heavy winter fabric for the rank and file and finished winter uniforms for senior advisors.⁶ The plan to limit the conferral of finished uniforms to senior staff came under additional scrutiny after Mingzong learned from Fiscal Commissioner Ren Huan of the Tang practice of outfitting officials in equal measure regardless of rank. "I understand that the Tang dynasty's provision of finished spring and winter uniforms extended even to the myriad of officials," Huan informed the emperor, "but since the waning years of Tang, chaotic conditions resulted in a shift in resources toward military spending, such that the government no longer provides uniforms for everyone. Based on current constraints, conferrals should be restricted to the court's inner circle, not subjects beyond." But the palace proved adamant and pressed Huan to develop a scheme based on the highest standards of Tang times, insisting, "Well, officials beyond the inner circle are equally subjects of mine! By all means, proceed with your calculations [for the wider distribution]!" Huan subsequently devised a scheme to provide finished uniforms twice a year, summer and winter. The expense was not inconsequential, but the political benefit six months into the reign of extending the perquisite to the widest spectrum of courtiers was beyond calculation.

In the eighth month of 926, as a special token of goodwill toward the government's most senior civilians, Mingzong withdrew thirty-four ivory staffs from palace vaults to bestow upon a select number of officials lacking this necessary component of their attire.⁷ His predecessor, Zhuangzong, had senselessly withheld these items of high value due apparently to the compulsive hoarding of his wife, another grievance against his administration. Many officials, likely carrying their new staffs for the first time, appeared in the Wenming Palace in the middle of the eighth month to enter through the "side-door" for the first informal audience on the calendar. This particular story highlights the emperor's urgency to make a positive impression on a group that had played a negligible role in the mutiny that swept him to power, but would prove critical to his success in governing.

5. For rationale, see CFYG 74.807–08.

6. JWDS 37.511.

7. JWDS 37.508.

As the emperor concluded his year long sojourn to Kaifeng, he passed through Zhengzhou in the early months of 929 and insisted on paying a personal visit to Zheng Jue, the retired chief counselor, who had returned home due to infirmity (whether his own or that of a close relative is not known). Mingzong subsequently made a gift of 200,000 copper coins, the equivalent of 260 strings of cash. Having earlier given a residence to Jue at Zhengzhou on the occasion of his retirement, the additional gift of cash may have seemed excessive to some courtiers.⁸ But Mingzong obviously saw a special need and responded accordingly, giving little thought to official opinion at the time. As a chief counselor for five years under Later Tang rule, Jue was held in exceptionally high regard, despite occasional differences with colleagues over policies. He was among the first to propose an imperial tour to Kaifeng, against the objections of some colleagues. Once the opposition persisted, the trip was cancelled, a change that Jue ultimately endorsed as well. His inconsistency on such matters may have frustrated fellow counselors, some of whom regarded him as unprincipled, but Mingzong clearly saw the flip-flop in other ways, including a man's ability to evolve. Within weeks after visiting Jue, the administration issued the following decree: "Hereafter, among the myriad of officials requesting release from official duties to care for [ailing] parents, an appropriate gift in the form of medicine and tea shall be conferred by the court."⁹ In this way, a privilege restricted to a handful of intimates was now extended to a wider officialdom in the spirit of inclusiveness.

Another anecdote reflecting imperial concern for the livelihood of official subjects emerges in 933, the last year of the reign, when Mingzong learned that Chief Counselor Li Yu was gravely ill. He dispatched a senior advisor to inquire of Yu's condition, only for the aide to find him living under the most decrepit of conditions at a local guesthouse, where the four walls contained not a single adornment. Clearly, Yu never availed himself of the furnished residence provided chief counselors by the government as a matter of policy. News of the statesman's dire living conditions caused the emperor to confer a hundred thousand coppers (roughly 130 strings of cash), a hundred bolts of silk, and thirteen pieces of bedding.¹⁰ Concern with mundane issues of this sort was a luxury afforded Mingzong by virtue of reigning at a time of relative stability, but it was also a natural outgrowth of the value that he attached to personal relationships over a lifetime.

8. JWDS 40.548; XWDS 54.620.

9. JWDS 40.549.

10. JWDS 44.603; XWDS 54.621–22.

Rules and Regulations

Mingzong's administration endeavored to humanize certain rules that governed the lives of officials, which often seemed exploitive or inflexible. He substantially reduced the fees charged officials for promotions in rank, dubbed "gratuities" or *liqian* in the sources, which for officials of the highest rank were reduced from 40,000 to 20,000 coppers. The reductions for officials at the entry level were even larger in relative terms.¹¹ Clearly, the court must have considered charges under the previous administration as excessive. The lowering of fees suggests imperial sensitivity to perceptions of the government as unfairly "bleeding" officials as a class, and especially men of little means. No doubt, the fees for promotion had been a minor inconvenience at the height of Tang rule, when courtiers largely hailed from hereditary elite. But civil servants in the Five Dynasties came from more diverse social backgrounds, as reflected in the inspiring story of Feng Dao, who may well have been the impetus behind this important reform of civil service practice. Months later, the government returned to the issue of fees charged for promotions, but now specifying that revenues generated by the fees would go to improving the office space or salaries of chief councilors.¹² Previous fees appear to have gone directly into general funds of the state treasury, where the military invariably took a hefty chunk. The earmark thus represents special outreach to the civilian leadership.

The palace issued a pronouncement during the second month of 928 relating to the movement of dependents for senior military officers. Its rationale is spelled out in the *Comprehensive Mirror*: "As the monarch prepared to leave Kaifeng, dependents of men in the various armies, people only recently moved to the city, were disgruntled by the news of another imperial trip to Weizhou, the Ye capital."¹³ The imperial sojourn to Weizhou was initially delayed for a month and subsequently cancelled due to negotiations between the palace and civil officials. An important inference behind the statement is that the retention in the capital of dependents of senior officers was practiced on a systematic basis, something familiar to most historians. Less widely known is the fact that these dependents moved with the monarch during extended stays from the capital, like the sojourn to Kaifeng in 927. The fact that the resentment of dependents informed Mingzong's calculus in cancelling a secondary trip to Weizhou gives some sense of their influence. Concern about what to do with dependent hostages also helps to explain official resistance to any imperial sojourn far afield.

11. The source specifies the fees, but not the unit of measurement, namely, copper coins or strings of cash, which I have deduced to be coppers based on prices at the time; see JWDS 36.503. Wolfram Eberhard interprets *liqian* as a fee for office, which may well apply to the Han and Tang, but not later periods of Chinese history, including the Five Dynasties; see Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, pp. 159–60.

12. JWDS 37.514.

13. ZZTJ 276.9012; Zhang Qifan, *Wudai jinjun*, p. 15.

In the case of Siyuan prior to the accession, only one son, Congjing, was held hostage in the capital, his wife and other children continuing to reside in his last official posting, Zhenzhou. Similarly for Meng Zhixiang, his spouse and children resided at their hometown at Jinyang for most of his eight years as Shu governor, although at least one son held office elsewhere. This would suggest that a single family member was acceptable to serve as collateral for the government, ideally an adult son of the legal wife, who could also serve in the armed forces. Wives and small children were less desirable as hostages, as they could not serve in the military and would place additional strain on official accommodations in the capital, where residences were in short supply.¹⁴

In reaction to a case involving abuses of bureaucratic privilege, the court relaxed certain rules pertaining to the “protection privilege” (*yinbu*) that officials could transfer to unrelated men. The reform, adopted in the fifth month of 931, “allowed men without sons or grandsons to identify individuals to inherit their protection privilege.”¹⁵ This important bureaucratic perk had traditionally served to insulate scholar-official families from the competitiveness of the examination system by passing entry-level rank to sons and grandsons, but the privilege could not be transferred to peripheral kin or unrelated persons. The new rules allowed officials without a male heir to transfer the privilege to others. The court was responding to a case where the documentation for eligibility had been violated, so it sought to minimize such abuses in the future by widening the scope of the scheme. Under the new system, an official’s adopted son was eligible to exploit “protection privilege,” but only in the absence of a biological heir. In allowing unrelated persons to inherit privilege, the edict was effectively acknowledging the reality of social dislocation, whereby many official families faced decline or even extinction for lack of male heirs. The reform effectively turned this once intangible official perquisite into something like a tangible asset, a historic turn in China’s institutional history. It also proved more accommodating to the highly fluid family structures within the non-Han population at the time, where adoptions were widespread.

The edict widening access to the “protection” privilege for bureaucratic families also broke new ground in allowing access for the sons born to concubines, adding clarity to an area of ambiguity in the past. In China, the sons of concubines had less legal standing relative to the sons of legal wives, especially as pertains to inheritance rights, so this particular reform afforded those offspring equal standing in the eyes of the government in the narrow arena of “protection” privilege. At the same time, the reform tightened regulations by restricting adopted sons to a single quota. It further established a rigorous regime of documentation, threatening violators with capital punishment. And finally, the mandate broke new ground in allowing officials seeking promotion

14. XWDS 56.647.

15. JWDS 42.578–79; CFYG 633.7312–13; Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, pp. 159–60.

under the current dynasty to apply their seniority based on length of service in the preceding Liang dynasty. For a time of social dislocation, creating greater flexibility for the seniority system must have been welcome news, as a sizable number of civilian courtiers in Later Tang times, perhaps even a majority, had served under the previous regime. But recognizing seniority under a regime denounced as “bogus” by the current ruler and his predecessor represents a major adjustment in mindset. Reforms of this sort reflected Mingzong’s heightened concern with the special needs of courtiers in changing times.

Law and Order

Protecting the People

Imperial concern about law and order ran throughout the reign and extended from the administration of justice to immunity from criminal punishment for the political elite. The suicide of a female servant at a marketplace in Luoyang at the end of 926 triggered a review of existing practices for investigating and disposing of suicidal deaths. By tradition, such incidents were handled by the Ministry of Finance, apparently due to its purview over population registers, and it reported in turn to censors. But both offices were located in the capital and removed from the location of most crimes. Under the new regulations, the administration empowered prefectural or county governments to investigate questionable deaths for all persons, regardless of class, after receiving petitions from censors. The reform should have saved on administrative costs, as investigations were conducted at the regional level.¹⁶ Obviously, local authorities were more familiar with the particulars of their own domain, which promised a better judicial outcome. The fact that the death of a commoner could now trigger a government investigation must have seemed rather progressive in its day.

The court also approved early in 927 a petition from the remonstrance official Li Tong to reduce the prisoner population empire-wide by empowering local authorities to reassess the fairness of criminal sentences handed down in the past. The request presumes the existence of many innocent men and women imprisoned on bogus charges or given unjust sentences, but the mandate devolves responsibility for uncovering injustices upon regional leaders, whereas in other periods in Chinese history, the legal professionals in the Censorate or Ministry of Justice would have dominated the process.¹⁷ Presumably legal expertise in the capital was inadequate for the task. The review of sentences was vital to improving the wider system of justice, but reducing the prison population was economically expedient as well. Imperial pardons would follow

16. JWDS 37.514–15.

17. JWDS 38.518.

in subsequent years to address the problem more comprehensively, although they were not without controversy.

Toward the end of the fourth month of 927, the master of remonstrance, Liang Wenju, petitioned the throne about the “pervasive practice of abducting commoners” by the armed forces during the Shu conquest from 925 to 926. He called upon the government to ascertain the number of displaced persons, apparently with the intent of returning people to their homes. According to sources, a sizable number of Shu royals either perished or vanished in the vicinity of the western capital, while their attendants suffered every sort of abuse including forced servitude at the hand of capricious local authorities. Mingzong found the request so compelling that he went one step further, ordering the preparation of lists of missing people from the past decade of wars along the Yellow River—conflicts familiar to him as field commander. The victims in this expanded group must have numbered in the thousands or even tens of thousands, so the undertaking would be neither quick nor easy. The purpose or purposes of the lists are not disclosed, although presumably the emperor’s objectives went beyond mere information to include a plan of action to apprise kinsmen of the whereabouts of the displaced as the first step toward reuniting families.¹⁸ The palace subsequently rewarded Wenju with a promotion to Deputy Censor-in-chief.

Protecting the powerless from abuse by men of privilege emerges in perhaps the most emotionally evocative story from the reign of Mingzong. During the first month of 928, a military inspector at Kaifeng, Hun Gonger, had informed the court of a case involving two youths playing with bamboo poles as if in military training—a capital offense, if the activity could be linked to nefarious schemes. With the emperor in residence at Kaifeng, the city’s inspector was surely on high alert and thus inclined to overreact to any perceived danger. He had rushed to execute the boys, which prompted Mingzong to refer the case to the presiding governor Shi Jingtang, husband of his eldest daughter. Jingtang’s inquiry revealed that the parties involved were actually children. The monarch immediately upbraided Gonger, “whose reckless enforcement of the law caused the youths to die needlessly.” He invoked specifically the example of Yao and Shun, “who valued life and enforced laws with compassion.” He also proceeded to lavish honors upon the young victims while fasting for ten days to appease their ghosts. Swift punishment followed for Gonger as prime mover of the injustice; he received twenty blows with the heavy club before banishment to Dengzhou. Meanwhile, Jingtang was fined one month’s salary for failing to clarify matters at the outset as presiding governor. The emperor’s well-considered response produced a chorus of “petitions of congratulations” from officials, who appreciated that even a minor penalty for a close family friend required more than the usual store of courage.¹⁹

18. JWDS 38.523, 38.526.

19. JWDS 39.533–34.

The administration's humanistic approach to overly burdensome legal prescriptions emerges in another case toward the end of the reign, where several military officers in the northwest border region were found guilty of underreporting horses in government stables. The men involved, led by Pei Zhaoyin, had failed to report a horse in their care, presumably to steal or sell it. Local authorities petitioned the court to impose the mandatory death sentence, although Mingzong demurred, arguing, "We can ill afford to exchange the lives of three men for a single horse!" The trio received floggings instead, an astonishing reduction in sentence.²⁰ The monarch had surely heard of the story from the early Tang, where a groom was nearly killed by Taizong for allowing a horse to die of neglect, and sought to set a humane contrast.²¹ The case confronted by Mingzong differed from early Tang because the culprits were military officers for whom the expectations of responsibility were higher. But the final dispensation reflects the monarch's proclivity to scrutinize the particulars of cases involving capital punishment and adjust sentences appropriately in the interest of justice.

Writs of Immunity

The emperor reviewed a legal practice particular to the Tang dynasty during discussions with the academician Zhao Feng, in the eleventh month of 928. "Writs of immunity" or "iron bulls" (*tiequan*) had been issued to a small number of senior statesmen promising financial security and legal immunity to the official and his descendants. The practice appears to have originated long ago with the Central Asian Turks, but its introduction to China dates from the late ninth century, when Tang monarchs issued writs to an exclusive cluster of powerful governors to buttress their loyalties by insulating them from acts of retribution.²² Perhaps the most nefarious conferee in Tang times was Zhu Wen, the same man who eventually overturned the dynasty, his writ merely emboldening him in his treachery. Under the Later Tang, Zhuangzong had conferred writs of immunity, inscribed in metal or stone, upon three military leaders who figured prominently in the conquest, including Mingzong. All three conferrals came in the first year of the reign, but two of the three recipients, Guo Chongtao and Zhu Youqian, would perish in purges toward the end of the reign, due to the insecurities of the monarch and the intrigues of lesser men. The scandalous conduct of Zhuangzong had undermined the credibility of the government, prompting Mingzong, now in the third year of his reign, to refrain from issuing a single writ, although a conversation with the academician Zhao Feng reveals that he had reflected long and hard on the matter. As recipient of a writ in the past, the policy was intensely personal.

20. JWDS 43.589–90.

21. Wu Jing and Xie Baocheng, *Zhenguan zhengyao jijiao*, 2.99.

22. Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, pp. 150–52.

Zhao Feng began deliberations on writs of immunity by noting the evolution of the practice in the preceding century: "In the past, emperors promised merely to preserve the noble rank and salary of descendants." In effect, the Tang practice began as a loose guarantee of financial assets and social standing, but it did not include immunity from criminal prosecution like in the Later Tang. Mingzong could scarcely wait to intercede with his own tortured experience:

In the reign of my predecessor, only Guo Chongtao, Li Jilin (Zhu Youqian), and myself received writs of immunity. Chongtao and Jilin were soon slain along with their families, while I was imperiled by suspicions and managed to escape by a hair's breadth. Day and night, I continue to be haunted by those memories.

It is common knowledge that Mingzong was held under veritable house arrest in the capital during the winter of 925 to 926, months before his springtime mutiny, but the passage above is revealing about his despair at the time, the extent to which vivid memories remained. Upon completing the sentence, Mingzong heaved a heavy sigh, allowing Zhao Feng to reach the right conclusion: "Emperors must uphold good faith, so inscription in gold and stone should not be necessary."²³ In effect, action matters more than words and written guarantees are a poor substitute for conducting affairs in good faith. Inaction on writs of immunity thus represented action of a different sort.

In Search of Justice

The monarch believed in the value of public punishments as a deterrent, but he remained concerned about the attitude of the people witnessing executions and issued the following mandate in 928: "On days when we impose the most severe punishments in the capital, the entire populace should refrain from indulging in music and food consumption."²⁴ Mingzong seemed intent on mourning any and all deaths caused by the state, even for criminals who deserved to die, while compelling the city's larger populace to join him in reflecting on the value of human life and the personal consequences of lapses in judgment. In the history of imperial China, there are few parallels, let alone the Five Dynasties.

The court expanded efforts against official corruption by trying to diminish the opportunities for collusion between regional officials and locally prominent families. An edict in 931 attempted to insert a veritable wall between wealth and power, proclaiming, "Prefectural and county officials across the realm are hereby forbidden to socialize together in the same *yamen* office with well-to-do families under their jurisdiction."²⁵ This ruling from Luoyang came in response to a letter from a minor county official seeking clarification about what classes of people were obliged to provide

23. JWDS 39.543–44; ZZTJ 276.9025.

24. JWDS 39.541–42.

25. JWDS 42.582; CFYG 66.699.

clerical service to the local government, official households or commoner households. Mingzong reiterated the duty of both classes to provide conscript labor and, at the same time, worried about wealthy families bribing officials to evade service, which he characterized as a violation of conventional practices. To its credit, the administration did not attempt to ban socializing between powerful officials and wealthy locals; it merely proscribed fraternizing in government offices. Even then, the regulation must have been impossible to enforce, but the emperor was a master of political symbolism and both parties would likely be more circumspect about their interactions in the future as a consequence of this directive. Later dynasties often tapped official households, that is, families that could better afford the extra burden, to assist with clerical services as part of their conscript labor obligation, but the Later Tang clearly drafted commoners as well.

The government took a number of tangible steps to elevate the status of legal professionals, including the launching of an official examination on jurisprudence, as shown below. The following decree in the eighth month of 931 pertained solely to the advancement of legal experts in the capital: "The promotion trajectory for officials at the Court of judicial review should parallel [similar cases] in the Department of State Affairs, while the trajectory for lesser legal personnel at the Ministry of Justice should parallel personnel at the Ministry of Rites."²⁶ By tradition, the Ministry of Rites, responsible for such weighty matters as imperial etiquette and the civil service examinations, had been elevated above the other ministries. These adjustments in promotion trajectories reflect the monarch's willingness to ignore Confucian prejudice against legal professionals by affording them special standing in his own administration.

Clemency for Criminals

Mingzong issued more amnesties than any monarch in his day, yet he still appears to have been blindsided by a savvy critique of the practice rather late in the reign, the tenth month of 932. The memorial came from the vice-minister of justice, Kang Cheng, a piece preserved in multiple sources, including the *Historical Records*. He begins by censuring the prevailing political culture in the absence of An Chonghui:

There are five phenomena that need not worry the ruler of men, but six phenomena that should rightfully alarm him. He need not worry if the sun, moon, and stars are off orbit, nor worry if change is visible in the heavens, nor worry over the beguiling words of petty men, nor worry if mountains shatter and rivers turn dry, nor worry about the calamities of flood, drought, locusts, and grain-eating insects. However, he should rightfully be alarmed if literati of wisdom insist on seclusion, alarmed if the four classes change professions, alarmed if superiors commingle with interiors, alarmed if the sense of honesty and shame wanes, alarmed

26. JWDS 42.581.

if truth is corrupted by flattery, and utterly terrified if candid council is not heard. For affairs that do not merit worry, I trust that Your Majesty will acknowledge these without necessarily imposing the full penalties of the law for offenders. But for matters deserving of imperial alarm, Your Majesty should change conditions without the slightest vacillation.²⁷

The sweep of Cheng's indictment is startling for a man on the margins of political life at the time. The lines referencing "truth corrupted by flattery" or "inferiors comingling with superiors" are viewed as a fairly transparent indictment of the slayings of Ren Huan and An Chonghui, two ethical pillars ruined by the rumors of lesser men. The reference to "truth corrupted by flattery" is somewhat less transparent, but likely an allusion to the effusive praise of flatterers that eroded the throne's tolerance for censure, as reflected in the recent departure of Zhao Feng and increased favor for Feng Dao. The line critiquing the four classes of people for "changing professions" is similarly opaque, but it may well allude to the use of under-qualified men for high office due cronyism. And finally, the memorial suggests that the once accessible Mingzong had grown dependent on a dwindling number of insiders, "causing literati of wisdom to prefer seclusion" as "candid council disappears."

Despite the caustic tone of Kang Cheng's memorial, Mingzong responded with gifts and platitudes, signaling that he took no offense. Earlier, he defended his program of amnesties by invoking the memory of the ancients:

I hear that Yao and Shun presided over institutions that moderated penalties to reflect their sense of civic responsibility and fondness for human life. Yu and Tang spoke out to redress criminal punishments as part of a general acknowledgement of the prevailing excesses.²⁸

Mingzong aspired to rule in the same spirit. Another motivation might well have been the need to ease social conflict, as prisons in traditional China were filled with not just dangerous brigands, but non-violent offenders like soldiers deserting the army, locals evading conscript service, and officials banished for misdeeds or disfavor.²⁹ As a longtime resident of China, Mingzong surely appreciated the maladies of the country's understaffed and poorly monitored legal system and the plethora of injustices it produced.

Campaign against Corruption

Mingzong would be at once idealistic and pragmatic in campaigning against official corruption. In the seventh month of 926, the court prohibited local governors and prefects from imposing illicit surcharges on taxes and other remittances that exploited

27. JWDS 53.595; XWDS 6.66–67; ZZTJ 278.9077–78.

28. CFYG 151.1688.

29. Zeng Guofu, "Lüelun Wudai Houtang," p. 3.

their taxing powers to fleece the people. Such abuses in regional governance had a long history in China, so a single mandate was unlikely to change conditions overnight, but explicit bans of the sort allowed legal authorities to exact heavier penalties for future violations. The mandate also prohibited “locally powerful families from advancing their personal interests through bribery.”³⁰ Coming several months into the reign, the edict represents one of the earliest efforts to curb corruption at the local level, a push destined to widen over the years. Secondly, the mandate prodded county and garrison officials to reject extralegal financial impositions from governors, another common abuse of power. Lastly, the decree compelled regional governors to provide greater detail on the background of candidates recommended for office, presumably to curtail nepotism.

The court’s attention later in the year shifted to malfeasance among the armed forces in the capital, where the government prohibited commanders from “entering contracts to sell commoners as slaves.”³¹ The petition in the ninth month of 926 came from the Metropolitan Officials Section (*duguan*), which exercised police and judicial authority over government personnel, and implies that a significant number of senior officers were selling slaves on a contractual basis. The scale of the problem is unclear, although slavery existed on the margins for most periods of Chinese history, sometimes for the purpose of removing commoners from the tax registers and sometimes to address disruptions in labor supply. Due to higher levels of geographic mobility in North China under the Five Dynasties, labor shortages must have been fairly common. Slaves sometimes worked in government factories, while others provided every sort of domestic service, including personal security. Regional officials procuring slaves to serve as military retainers may well have been the target of this injunction. The matter does not appear again in subsequent chapters of the Basic Annals, so the problem of slavery may well have declined as a consequence of imperial action.

In the fifth month of 930, the court imposed a succession of severe punishments for official misconduct. At the city of Zhengzhou, the city’s defense commissioner, Zhang Jin, and deputy commissioner, Xian Jiwei, were dismissed and banned from future office-holding due to misdeeds that included, “stealing the valuables of city-dwellers,” presumably using their offices as cover to burglarize homes.³² Mingzong had passed through Zhengzhou a year earlier, upon concluding his sojourn to Kaifeng, so this action pertaining to local policing likely emanated from intelligence gathered by him or his aides during their time in the city.

Before long, the palace addressed the connection between official abuses at the local level and the networks of powerful men in the capital, abuses that required constant

30. JWDS 37.508–09; Wang Gungwu, *The Structure of Power in North China*, p. 182.

31. JWDS 37.510.

32. JWDS 41.565.

diligence to eradicate. The edict of 931, with its far-reaching ramifications, reads in part:

I was recently apprised of the practice whereby the myriad of metropolitan officials—including administrators in the government's three agencies, esteemed members of the court, heralds of imperial pronouncements, or enforcers of public policy—exploited their powers as regional governors to intimidate the local elite, harass personnel, finagle offices for their friends, covertly manipulate edicts or overtly issue documents and letters. Such practices are hereby wholly proscribed with penalties of forfeiture of office for perpetrators and banishment to the provinces for violators.³³

The decree highlights the many ways that unscrupulous courtiers might collude with local authorities to thwart government policy. Rulers of the preceding Liang dynasty had focused on the malfeasance of regional governors, but Mingzong appears equally attentive to vice on the part of administration insiders. In reality, progress was necessary on both fronts, in the capital and across the circuits, as improprieties at one level inevitably encouraged improprieties at the other. The severity of the punishments, dismissal or banishment, speaks to the commitment of the palace to this initiative.

Corruption remained on the administration's radar as late as 932, where the chief of court ceremonials, Liu Ying, was charged with "selling documents for titular posts to unrelated men with the same surname," an abuse of the "protection" privilege for literati families. The punishment could have been exile or death, although in light of the relatively minor nature of the offense, the court elected simply to strip Liu Ying of his official post and prohibit future service.³⁴ In another case, an administrator in the Office for Palace Services, Ding Yanhui, had colluded with a granary administrator to pilfer several hundred bushels of millet. The court punished the two men with death by strangling, presumably to set a higher standard for senior palace officials given to corrupting their underlings. A lesser case of nepotism and graft involved Jing Xinmo, an actor once favored by Zhuangzong, whom authorities accused of presiding over a network of bribery and favoritism. His punishment entailed flogging and restitution of illicitly acquired wealth, among the lightest of possible penalties.³⁵ Xinmo's misdeeds were largely of the petty sort, such as privileging his friends to special favors from the palace, which likely explains the court's inclination toward clemency. The action so late in the reign suggests that Mingzong continued to scrutinize the conduct of actors once favored by his predecessor, men no longer present in the corridors of power, but still involved in elite life.

33. JWDS 42.578.

34. JWDS 42.578.

35. JWDS 43.596.

Historical Practices and Projects

Tang History

The court of Mingzong made a little known yet important contribution to historical research for the preceding Tang dynasty. The History Bureau had noted the lack of Veritable Records for the last four reigns, starting with Xuanzong (r. 846–859). It proposed various ways to obtain “unofficial historical materials” (*yeshi*) from across the south, focusing on the Liangzhe and Jinghu regions.³⁶ The announcement in 932 demonstrates the direct involvement by official historians under Mingzong in gathering primary sources for the Tang dynastic history, which was completed a decade later under the Later Jin. In effect, Jin historians get credit for research dating to Later Tang times, as the Veritable Records are the foundation texts for the dynastic history. The statement also proves that official historians in the Five Dynasties did not rely solely on sources from the Tang History Bureau, a common complaint, but instead drew widely upon unofficial histories and anecdotal literature to balance official accounts. And finally, compilers at the History Bureau insisted on consulting sources from the periphery, including southern states over which Luoyang exercised no administrative control. This anecdote serves as a reminder of the degree of dislocation in the north following the fall of Changan, which forced every class of people to migrate to the south, historical materials moving with the émigrés.

Contemporary History

The History Bureau under Mingzong made some noteworthy contributions to historical research for the current dynasty, the Later Tang. The Bureau forwarded the following request to the court in the summer of 929: “We wish to employ the term Veritable Records (*Shi lu*) in compiling a record of events for the reign of Zhuangzong, while using the term Chronicle (*Ji nian lu*) for the reigns of his three ancestors (Zhuye Zhiyi, Li Guochang, and Li Keyong).”³⁷ The request concerning the titles of the works must have come late in the process of compilation, as the *Veritable Records for Zhuangzong*, in thirty chapters, was finished four months later.³⁸ The chronicles for Zhuangzong’s father and grandfather, consisting of twenty chapters, were completed months after the work on Zhuangzong. By convention, Veritable Records, the foundation text for the Basic Annals in the dynastic history, were employed exclusively for former Sons of Heaven. The terminology employed by historians for Zhuangzong recognizes his unique role in dynastic history by affording him a Veritable Record; his aborted rule

36. JWDS 43.595–96.

37. JWDS 40.552; WDHY 18.299.

38. JWDS 40.555.

did not detract from his tangible deeds in early life. Keyong may have been held in higher personal regard, but he never ruled as emperor.

Inasmuch as Mingzong was Keyong's adopted son, official historians no doubt worried that he might be offended by the relegation of Keyong to a mere Chronicle, which effectively diminished his historical stature. At the same time, the petition demonstrates that the History Bureau under Mingzong was already deeply engaged in compiling a comprehensive study of Shatuo rule in the Middle Kingdom for the past century, a project most likely begun by his predecessor, but never completed.³⁹ Drafting the Veritable Records for Zhuangzong allowed official historians to cast his reign in sufficiently negative ways to justify the coup against him. Mingzong's commitment to such projects highlights his use of history as a tool of legitimation in ways reminiscent of Tang Taizong. These projects were never wholly pedantic exercises.⁴⁰ The staff at the History Bureau under the Later Tang was larger than any other period in the Five Dynasties, including the longer-lived Liang regime, a development principally of the Mingzong reign.⁴¹ The agendas and standards of History Bureaus in the tenth century may have been informed by Tang conventions, but the Shatuo proved able caretakers of this venerable institution.

Historical Standards

The court's strict oversight over the History Bureau is reflected in an anecdote from 928 about the imperially sanctioned tomb inscription for the commander Huo Yanwei, a man whose complicated political record posed special problems for the composer. Author Li Qi, a former chief councilor under the Liang dynasty, was charged in 928 with "failing to distinguish the *legitimate* from the *bogus*" in his narrative. That is, official sources of the Later Tang invariably added the adjective "bogus" (*wei*) in any mention of the Liang, a sophomoric exercise for scholars, to be sure, but a duty nonetheless for someone writing in an official capacity. The inscription by Li Qi, however, had deleted "bogus" from most references to the Liang for reasons of "ongoing affinity for the dynasty," contemporaries alleged, as someone who had similarly served the regime at the highest level. Mingzong responded to the controversy with surprising conservatism, mandating a rewrite to insert the word "bogus" before each citing of the dynasty.⁴² In effect, he elected to uphold historical convention. At the same time, the court aspired to high empirical standards in writing contemporary history by assigning renowned compilers from across the realm to draft inscriptions and reputable officials

39. Twitchett, *The Writing of Official History under the T'ang*, p. 191.

40. Twitchett, *The Writing of Official History under the T'ang*, pp. 3–4, 158, 191–92; Wang Gungwu, "The Chiu Wu-tai Shi," pp. 1–22.

41. Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, pp. 162–63.

42. JWDS 40.553; CFYG 553.6332.

to oversee historical agencies in the capital: the chief editor of the History Bureau at the time of the controversy was Zhao Feng, a man certain to expose any infelicities.

Historical Anthologies

The court committed itself to preserving materials related to the laws and institutions of the preceding Tang through two separate initiatives. It mandated in 931 the reproduction on paper of legal statutes and ordinances for the current dynasty, plus appropriate sections of the *Six Canons of Tang* (*Tang liudian*), a work originally compiled in 739 on the six areas of governance: finances, education, rites, politics, laws, and events. The scrolls were to be placed on the walls of prefectural and county offices in order to guide the decisions of authorities, especially legal authorities.⁴³ Later in the year, the court dispatched legal administrators around the country to assess compliance to the current regulations by reviewing individual cases, a sign of its special commitment to the initiative.⁴⁴ The ready availability of such texts was intended to preclude any radical departure from early Tang traditions by present-day administrators.

In the summer of 933, the government announced the start of a project to revise a major Tang compendium on laws, institutions, and other topics as a guide for the present. The compendium, compiled under the auspices of the Censorate, was entitled *Dazhong tonglei*, a preservation project that doubled as guide for administrators across the empire.⁴⁵ The project highlights the continued veneration of Tang political institutions and legal practices well into the Five Dynasties. It also confirms the Later Tang commitment to extending the court's administrative sway over the locales in the thoroughgoing manner of the Tang at its peak.

Collaboration with Other Bureaus

The gathering of information of a different sort had inspired a decree directed at the Bureau of Astronomy late in the second month of 932. It instructed the bureau to collect information on droughts and floods, weather and clouds, omens good and bad, plus movements related to the ten sources of light (the sun, moon, and eight planets) for conveyance to the History Bureau. The data could then be consulted by writers of the Veritable Records and the dynastic history to provide a fuller picture of the impact of natural events upon political developments.⁴⁶ The mere promulgation of the decree suggests that information on natural events had not been forwarded to the History Bureau in any systematic fashion in the past, the two bureaus presumably working

43. JWDS 42.580.

44. JWDS 43.587–88.

45. JWDS 44.605.

46. JWDS 43.589.

separately. The heightened attention to anomalies and natural events underscores the extent to which Mingzong saw politics and nature as closely intertwined. Such proclivities stand in striking contrast with the early Tang, where astronomers and historians worked independently at different bureaus with the intent of isolating both bureaus from political influence. The call for greater collaboration cannot be considered altogether new, but on the heels of a Tang historical legacy that stressed the power of reason over superstition, Mingzong's stress on the power of nature over men appears rooted in a different religious tradition or an earlier time in China.⁴⁷

Another noteworthy administrative change at the History Bureau under Mingzong involved assigning the palace secretary responsible for composing epitaphs and congratulatory messages (*zhuzuo lang*) to the History Bureau as auxiliary, an action emanating from a request from executives at the bureau.⁴⁸ Courtiers doubtless reasoned that the job of composition entailed no small measure of historical research, for which the History Bureau was ideally suited as the chief repository of documents pertaining to dynastic history. In this way, the prestigious literary office came under the auspices of historians, another factor contributing to the expansion of the History Bureau in Later Tang times.

Culture

Weddings

In the late summer of 927, Mingzong prepared for the marriage of Congrong, the poetry aficionado who was his eldest son.⁴⁹ The proud father visited the teenager's residence for a bachelor's party, an event continuing late into the night, and brought along courtesans from his own palace to entertain the men. One beauty struck the fancy of the prince, causing the father to leave her as a wedding present. Emperors often conferred consorts upon esteemed officials and powerful governors, a favor once bestowed upon Li Keyong, Mingzong's adopted father, but the giving of a consort to an imperial son was rather rare due to the appearance of incest, as the women generally had a history of intimacy with the father. Congrong married the daughter of Liu Zhongyin, a prominent Han-Chinese governor, on the twenty-sixth day of the month (927.08.26), a ceremony attended by a large number of officials, whose felicitations arrived in the form of petitions. The imperial son, recently returned from Weizhou, reciprocated by lavishing gifts upon his father: cash, silk, assorted silver objects, and a horse (presumably a rare specimen). The practice of sons giving wedding gifts to fathers may also be rooted in nomadic culture, in which case the story lends evidence

47. McMullen, *State and Scholars in Tang China*, pp. 177–78, 197.

48. JWDS 44.605. On the duties of the *zhuzuo zuolang*, see CFYG 554.6336–38.

49. JWDS 38.526; WDHY 10.173.

of residual elements of Shatuo culture in the monarch's private life.⁵⁰ The sons and daughters of Mingzong were all married off to military men like himself, although not necessarily Shatuo ethnics as noted in Chapter 1, suggesting that profession was more important than race in arranging marriages.

Religion

The emperor was clearly a superstitious man, the source of frequent confrontations with advisors, especially An Chonghui. The first anniversary of the accession coincided with a stunning rise in reports from across the realm of miraculous appearances, including white magpies at Yingzhou and Huaizhou, white cranes at Cangzhou, birds with three legs at Yanzhou, and wheat with forked buds from Huazhou.⁵¹ The pace of the presentations reached such a frenzy that Military Commissioner An Chonghui grew more aggressive in rejecting them, often without consulting the palace. The presentation of auspicious objects nonetheless continued, albeit at a lesser pace. The bulk of emperors in Chinese history tended to be considerably more superstitious than their advisors, but in the case of Mingzong, the degree of divergence appears greater.

Certain rituals practiced by Mingzong have undeniable origins in Inner Asia. He visited the White Horse Slope, site of the White Horse Monastery, on the twenty-first day of the sixth month (927.06.21) for a special ritual, "conducting rites to the spirits of the Tujue Turks." This was a ritual "associated with the north," the *Historical Records* confirms. The monarch returned to the palace quite late into the night, having turned the short ritual visit into a prolonged excursion.⁵² To record, this was the first ritual performed by the emperor that specifically links Shatuo religious practices to the shamanistic Tujue. Some months later, Mingzong conducted rites to the "barbarian spirits" (*fanshen*) in the suburbs of the capital, a different venue from the summer rites.⁵³ It is possible that alien rituals of the sort continued to be practiced in less visible ways or less prominent venues, which might explain the decreased mention of such rites in the later years of his reign, unless indeed the unconventional practices simply waned under pressure from Chinese advisors. It is also noteworthy that Mingzong elected to perform the rites to the Tujue spirits at the White Horse Slope. In effect, he was linking religious practices imported from Inner Asia with the most established church in China. Turkish Buddhism at the time contained discernible elements of shamanism, according to one author, so the mixing of religion and superstition is hardly novel.⁵⁴ In matters of faith, however, the emperor was more curious than pious, certainly relative to his predecessor, who favored Buddhism.

50. JWDS 38.526; CFYG 111.1208.

51. JWDS 38.523–24.

52. JWDS 38.523–25; CFYG 114.1245; XWDS 6.58; Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, pp. 146–47.

53. JWDS 38.530.

54. Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, p. 146.

Hunting

Mingzong was an avid hunter in younger years, although excursions were infrequent during the reign due to advanced age. He discussed the reasons during an exchange with Feng Dao in the ninth month of 931. Dao began by praising the monarch's compassion for lesser creatures by releasing into the wild an assortment of hunting dogs and peregrine falcons while prohibiting their submission as tribute in the future. Many observers saw the actions as indicative of Mingzong's love of animals, but he insisted that his concern was more practical, namely, the negative impact of the hunt on the adjacent farms:

During a hunting trip with the Martial Emperor (Li Keyong) at the height of autumn, an animal fled into a patch of farmland and I galloped through to eventually capture the animal, leaving little of the original crop on the ground. Thoughts of this event have caused me to conclude that hunting does much harm and has little benefit, so I shall abstain from hunting in the future.⁵⁵

In disavowing the hunt, Mingzong hardly needed to cite an experience now thirty years old. A short six years earlier under his predecessor, farms were trampled and bodyguards suffered serious injury amidst hunting mishaps. Emperors could always minimize the risk through smaller and less frequent outings, which appears to have been Mingzong's preference from the outset. The hunt had turned into a spectacle under Zhuangzong, highly public statements about Shatuo identity, whereas the more culturally confident Mingzong relegated the hunt to ordinary sport. Ironically, the emperor still hunted in the twelfth month, a mere three months after the conversation with Feng Dao, sensing no contradiction between his public pronouncements and his private conduct.

Singing Arrows

On the heels of vanquishing Dingzhou insurgents in 927, Emperor Ming received celebratory arrows from Huo Yanwei, the Qingzhou governor and personal friend. In generations past, the Shatuo had employed arrows to convey commands to armies in the field, "singing arrows" (*chuanjian*) in the words of one historian, which produced a whistling sound as they glided through the air. The arrows even doubled as credentials for ambassadors to foreign states.⁵⁶ As a rule, the commander "conveys arrows" to subordinates not the inverse. "For a subject to send an arrow to his ruler," the *Historical Records* writes, "runs against propriety," that is, nomadic custom.⁵⁷ Mingzong found nothing offensive about this gesture of Yanwei. In good humor, he considered sending

55. ZZTJ 277.9061–62; JWDS 42.582–83.

56. Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, pp. 153–54.

57. JWDS 38.529; XWDS 46.506.

arrows to Yanwei in return, which aides vigorously opposed for fear of encouraging imitators.

Education and Examinations

Academies

The administration's commitment to cultivating the educated elite began with a focus on academies for palace erudites and eventually evolved into broader initiatives to expand higher education. The appointment of the empire's first Duanming academicians occurred on the twentieth day of the fifth month (926.05.20), led by the incorruptible Feng Dao and Zhao Feng.⁵⁸ Centuries later, the Duanming academy became fabled as an assemblage of erudite men with a moral core, although few historians realize that the academy originated in the Later Tang.⁵⁹ Sources attribute the academy's formation to An Chonghui, who, like the emperor, was largely illiterate in classical Chinese and needed a coterie of historically informed aides to translate his unformed ideas into concrete steps. In all likelihood, the court's civilian leadership played a larger role in the academy's formation than sources divulge. The high moral probity for the inaugural cluster of nominees for the academy suggests that personal ethics was no less critical to the selection process. From the outset, the court placed Duanming academicians before Hanlin academicians during audience formation, a sign of its high expectations for the institution.

The emperor approved changes to the rules governing admission to the Hanlin Academy during the second month of 930 in response to an appeal from academician Liu Xu. He sought to simplify the entrance examination by reducing the topics from five to three by eliminating separate examinations on poetry and rhapsodies, topics that likely favored Chinese natives. Liu Xu also proposed adding to the classics-based examination the following specialized topics: edicts (*mazhi*), diplomatic communications (*da fanshu*), and responses to questions (*pida*). The section on diplomatic communications (literally, "back-and-forth with foreigners") appears to be an innovation of the period, reflecting the dynasty's extensive diplomatic contacts. Presumably, the examination required some command of a language common to the borderlands. The Shatuo had no written language of their own, but the Tangut had a written script based on the Chinese character and the Uighurs had a phonetic script originating in Inner Asia. The language of medieval Persia, the ancestor of Farsi, had been brought to Changan centuries earlier by Persian settlers numbering in the tens of thousands, but they appear to have scattered even before the fall of the Tang dynasty due to repeated suppressions of foreign religions in the mid-to-late ninth century.

58. JWDS 36.498.

59. JWDS 36.498; WDHY 13.225; ZZTJ 275.8985–86.

The Hanlin Academy also requested in the same petition that the palace submit topical questions for the Academy's entrance examination and designate the length of responses, practices that originated in the civil service examinations.⁶⁰ The information about admissions criteria for the Hanlin Academy is highly revealing about examination practices in general under the Later Tang. The government appears to have been committed to making the examination more culturally neutral by marginalizing topics like Chinese poetry, a major departure from the past. The changes reiterated the centrality of the Chinese classics to the training of all potential recruits to the Hanlin Academy, which reflects continuity on fundamentals. Poetry was the passion of the eldest son of Mingzong, a passion once denigrated by the older man as morally distracting, so the elevation of the classics over poetry was likely informed by the emperor's experiences as father. The expanded role of the palace in the selection of candidates by submitting topical questions suggests confidence in the ability of Mingzong and his successors to negotiate these added responsibilities, despite their limited facility in Chinese. The reforms governing admission to the Hanlin Academy might well have been extended to the civil service, had the dynasty lasted longer.

University

The most important initiatives in public education occurred in the last years of Mingzong's reign, save for two matters in early 928. The court received a petition from the Secretariat to appoint chief councilors as co-administrators of the Directorate of Education (*Guozijian*), thereby making the Directorate's chancellor responsible to chief councilors. The palace approved the petition and selected the marginally literate Cui Xie for the post. The concurrent appointment of chief councilors as university chancellors was apparently intended to elevate the status of the university by associating its leadership with senior leaders in government. The advantages of the affiliation must have outweighed any concerns about the Directorate being drawn into the country's politics through the association.

Later in the same year, the Directorate of Education requested to fix the admissions quota for the university at two hundred students per year. The size of the university prior to the request is unknown, although the institution in early Tang contained several thousand students during its heyday at Changan, where students lived in the city's sprawling suburbs. Political disruptions in the late ninth and early tenth centuries must have cut the enrollment by a considerable measure. More importantly, the eastern capital of Luoyang was never built to accommodate a large university within the walls of the city while its suburbs were less expansive. Thus, a student population of two thousand might have existed in the best of times, but the Five Dynasties was a time of dislocation for cities in the Chinese heartland, a problem worsened by the relocation

60. JWDS 41.559–60.

of the capital from Changan to Kaifeng under the Liang dynasty, then to Luoyang for the Later Tang, prior to reverting to Kaifeng under subsequent dynasties. An annual recruitment of two hundred students under Mingzong would bring the total population to less than one thousand, a sizable number in light of the university's modest beginnings. Still, filling a quota of two hundred would take time and the dynasty did not last long enough to realize the emperor's dream.

The petition from the Directorate of Education contained a third component that addressed local education; namely, it requested that the government revive "public schools" or "colleges" (*guanxue*), presumably at the prefectural level.⁶¹ A system of regional schools to educate the elite, institutions funded chiefly through local taxes and charity, had existed in Tang times, if not earlier, but then declined during the dynasty's last century, leaving many districts with little more than empty buildings. The new administration had far to go in reversing this troubled state of affairs—refurbishing buildings, recruiting teachers, and creating a steady flow of income. The central government did not directly administer or fund the institutions in the manner of the Imperial University, but it could apply pressure to local authorities to do so. These several initiatives represent some of the earliest educational reforms on record for the reign, ambitious in attempting to reform institutions extending from the capital to the circuits, but sufficiently modest in scale to succeed. The subsequent Song dynasty is better known for establishing public schools at the local level, but the initiative has a little-known history dating to the Five Dynasties.

The Eight Schools

During the summer of 930, the administration launched its most ambitious initiative in higher education this time in the capital. The chancellor of the Imperial University, Zhang Pu, petitioned to revive the "Eight Institutes" (*baguan*), a misnomer for the six schools of higher education that existed in Tang times: the Upper and Lower Levels of the Imperial University, the Four Gates Academy, and the Schools of Law, Books, and Mathematics. The request suggests that Mingzong's predecessor never bothered to revive the institutions in Luoyang after relocating the capital to the city. The petition of Zhang Pu also sought an increase in the student quota for the schools. The dynastic history makes much of the fact that Chancellor Zhang had mistakenly attributed to the Tang a total of eight academies, when in fact no more than six academies ever existed, which in turn infers scant knowledge of educational history for the recent past.⁶² Little is known about Zhang Pu's credentials and the original edict is no longer extant, but it is hard to imagine the country's leading educator making a mistake of this magnitude. A more plausible explanation involves intentional exaggeration of Tang

61. JWDS 39.534; WDHY 16.275.

62. JWDS 41.561.

policies by the educator to justify a more ambitious agenda in his own day. Sources do not confirm whether the palace acted on Pu's proposal, which would surely have required some years to implement while incurring substantial costs. Advancements in higher education were luxuries for most rulers of the Five Dynasties, but Mingzong now stood in the enviable position of entertaining requests of the sort for the first time.

Educational Materials

Another notable achievement in the area of higher education came in the second month of 932 with publication by the Secretariat of the *Nine Classics*, a block print edition based on surviving texts on stone slabs.⁶³ The reproduction was designed to facilitate a wider dissemination of the work, as reflected in the decree announcing the project's completion:

As the source of education and leadership, the classics represent the ancestral root. Since the onset of military conflict [in the late Tang], many local schools have vanished, while those capable of transmitting classical knowledge have few students capable of profound and penetrating comprehension. . . . The great value to the community of transmitting such texts and propagating them widely should serve as a major vehicle for advancing Confucian education.⁶⁴

In addition, the decree confirms continuation under the Later Tang of the Tang tradition of devoting public schools to Confucian education, which had suffered due to the deteriorating physical condition of campuses, the hardware of local education in the recent century. The reproduction and dispersal of the classics was critical to restoring the software of teaching staff and reading materials. Several months later, the court honored the forty-third generation descendant of Confucius, Kong Renyu, as Duke Wenxuan, promoting him to magistrate for Longqiu county, in his native Shandong.⁶⁵ By reprinting the classics and honoring a descendant of Confucius, Mingzong paid homage to Confucianism as the foundation for agrarian values, a gesture of goodwill toward the not merely the country's political leadership, but its social elite.

Examinations

As illustrated by examination data in Table 1, in his seven-and-a-half year reign, Mingzong conferred 86 doctoral degrees, 105 "various fields" degrees, 4 classical expository degrees, and 1 erudite literatus degree. The source of this data, *Dengkeji kao*,

63. The Nine Classics of Tang times were: *Yijing*, *Shangshu*, *Shijing*, *Zhouli*, *Yili*, *Liji*, *Zuozhuan*, *Gongyangzhuan*, and *Guliangzhuan*. On the early Tang classical tradition, see Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire*, pp. 230–38.

64. CFYG 50.535; JWDS 43.588.

65. JWDS 43.591.

a Qing source, has long been criticized for inflated numbers, but it remains valuable as a guide for general trends due to the inadequacy of earlier sources. For example, the dramatic increase in yield for “various fields” degrees confirm heightened stress on specialized knowledge, consistent with an increased focus on legal practices toward the end of the reign. Conducting the examinations on a regular basis was vital to reviving literati interest in public service and the policy of changing chief examiners almost every year enhanced the credibility of the institution. It is noteworthy that two chief examiners received promotions as chief councilors soon after presiding over a successful exercise, Zhao Feng and Li Yu, proving the high value that the administration attached to the process. Moreover, the monarch took his duties of oversight very seriously, impugning the objectivity of two different examiners in the span of a year.

Scholars of later periods should remember that the examination system in the Five Dynasties provided academic credentials for a small group of highly literate men, but it was never designed as a recruitment mechanism to staff the civil service on a far-reaching basis in the manner of Song times. Entry to government in Mingzong’s day was generally based on the recommendation of standing officials, while subsequent promotions and demotions were a function of performance in office. The narrative below highlights some of the problems that emerged in the conduct of the examinations over the course of the reign and the palace’s response.

The first examination under Mingzong occurred in the eighth month of 926, presiding over by Pei Hao, a Hanlin academician under the Liang dynasty, who served the Later Tang at the time as vice-director of the Ministry of Rites. A total of eight candidates earned doctoral degrees, including Han Xizai, a man who subsequently migrated south to become a leading statesman in the state of Wu.⁶⁶ Some months later, Mingzong conferred “erudite” credentials (*boxue hongci*) upon Wang Chan, the sole conferral of the reign.⁶⁷ Civil service examinations would later be conducted in the twelfth month, so the scheduling of the first examination several months after the accession should be seen as a symbolic outreach to official families from a court anxious about public perceptions.

The examination in the twelfth month of 927 produced twenty-three doctoral degree winners, the largest single yield for the reign. Pei Hao presided over this exercise as well. The list included Li Tao, a man who hailed from a pedigreed family in the western capital, whose father had fled the Liang regime in search of sanctuary at the southern state of Chu. The son’s return to his homeland to acquire examination credentials and enter public service can only reflect the goodwill of a larger community of émigrés toward the new administration. Another nine men passed the topical “various fields” examinations (*zhuke*). The emperor banqueted the new degree-winners in his palace, consistent with tradition, but he broke with the past by giving four hundred

66. *Dengkeji kao*, p. 954; JWDS 92.1218–19.

67. *Dengkeji kao*, p. 955.

coppers to each successful candidate to motivate the next generation of aspirants, although admittedly the sum was rather paltry.⁶⁸

The examination in the twelfth month of 928, presided over by Hanlin academican Zhao Feng, produced fifteen doctoral degree winners and four winners under the “various fields” scheme.⁶⁹ The examiner was famed for his exacting standards as a politician, so he may have operated on similarly high standards in overseeing the 928 exercise, where the doctoral yield was significantly smaller than the previous year. But the court was in temporary residence in Kaifeng at the time, which must have reduced the pool of candidates and complicated procedures for administering the examination. Moreover, radical swings in examination yields were common throughout the reign in the absence of explicit quotas.

In the first month of 929, the court received a curious petition from the Youzhou governor, Zhao Dejun, who sought special assistance for one of the youngest examinees on the upcoming child prodigy examination. He noted that his grandson of five *sui* could recite from memory long passages from the *Analects* and *Classic on Filial Piety*. The grandson, Zhao Zan, had taken the examination for child prodigies in Kaifeng and passed, leaving the examination in the capital as the final hurdle. The palace responded by applauding the child’s tireless study and mandated his inclusion on the list of successful examinees for the current year, effectively waiving the metropolitan examination consistent with practices that honored the cultural attainments of military families.⁷⁰ Dejun had a son, Zhao Yanshou, a man married to the emperor’s daughter who appears to have lived in Kaifeng at the time, so the child likely belonged to the couple. Ironically, Mingzong had earlier imposed a rigorous regime of regulations on the nomination of child prodigies for an array of legitimate reasons, including the tendency of local officials to misrepresent the candidate’s real identity, as families were known to pay smarter boys to sit on the examinations for those less able.⁷¹ Waiving the metropolitan examination for his own family member was a glaring contradiction of state policy.

The civil service examination in the twelfth month of 929, produced thirteen doctoral degrees and two in the “various fields.”⁷² The exercise appears to have gone without serious criticism at the outset, but six months later courtiers charged the chief examiner, Zhang Wenbao, with “failing to find the best candidates,” having originally recommended fewer men for the doctoral degree. Wenbao was reprimanded and penalized by salary remission for several months. The administration must have found evidence of problematic assessment standards or personal bias by the examiner. The

68. *Dengkeji kao*, pp. 956–57. Another source suggests a conferral of 400,000 coins; see JWDS 38.531.

69. *Dengkeji kao*, p. 960.

70. JWDS 40.547, 98.1308–10. On the background of the Youzhou governor, see Standen, “Who Wants to Be Emperor?” pp. 15–46.

71. CFYG 641.7409.

72. *Dengkeji kao*, p. 964.

incident highlights the presence of serious shortcomings in administering the examinations due to decades of indifference.⁷³

The administration ordered a second round of examinations during the twelfth month of 930, due to improprieties in the summer exercise, conferring fifteen doctoral degrees, one “various fields” degree, and four degrees in “illuminating the classics” (*mingjing*). The small yield in “various fields” was a function of a reexamination mandated by the court, where the palace took the exceptional step of deleting nine names from the original list. Among the better-known doctoral degree winners was Li Gu, who became a distinguished chief counselor in the 950s.⁷⁴ The government mandated the revival of an examination on “illuminating legal traditions” (*mingfa*) based on Tang models, intent on expanding the pool of officials with legal expertise.⁷⁵ The court also revived the examination on the *Rites of the Kaiyuan Period*, an important resource on rituals from Tang times.⁷⁶ These several reforms in 930 appear to confirm the court’s belief in the complementarity of classical philosophy and legal culture.

In the early months of 931, the administration adopted new guidelines for the conduct of future civil service examinations: a change in scheduling from nighttime to daytime and completion of the examination in a single day.⁷⁷ The source fails to elaborate on the reasons for originally holding examinations at night, or more likely starting in the daytime and continuing into the night, but the change reflects a commitment to jettison the most tortuous aspects of the experience, which perhaps most negatively impacted the performance of minority groups like the Shatuo. In addition, the candles burned for nighttime lighting must have concerned firefighters, for a highly congested Luoyang was constructed chiefly of wood. Restrictions on the nighttime movement of residents of the capital were common throughout late imperial history, tenth-century Luoyang likely no exception.

A civil service examination in the seventh month of 931 produced only four doctoral degree holders. The overseer of the exercise, Li Yu, the Hanlin academician and future counselor, may have been unduly harsh, doubtless in reaction to charges of laxity in the “various fields” exercise of the previous year.⁷⁸ In the twelfth month of 932, the final examination of Mingzong’s reign, the palace conferred doctoral credentials upon eight men and “various fields” degrees upon eighty-one candidates.⁷⁹ The chief examiner for the exercise was He Ning, who had been a child prodigy from an elite Tang family and himself passed the specialty examination on the classics at seventeen *sui*.⁸⁰

73. JWDS 41.566.

74. *Dengkeji kao*, pp. 969–71; JWDS 68.905–06.

75. *Dengkeji kao*, p. 973.

76. JWDS 42.580; WDHY 23.371.

77. JWDS 42.576.

78. *Dengkeji kao*, pp. 974–75.

79. *Dengkeji kao*, p. 977.

80. JWDS 127.1671–72.

The wealth of successful candidates in the “various fields” groups suggests that the administration intentionally targeted men with knowledge in practical affairs. At the time of Mingzong’s death, the examination on “illuminating legal traditions,” revived two years ago, had yet to produce a successful candidate.

From Finances to Technology

Finances

Circumspection in managing the empire’s limited resources was in evidence from the very outset of Mingzong’s reign, in reaction to the excesses of his predecessor. Even as interim regent, Siyuan reduced his palace staff to a fraction of its former size, releasing a reputed two thousand persons, the majority of whom must have been women. The cuts made his staff among the smallest in recent history and tiny compared to that of Changan in its heady days as Tang capital. Economizing on administrative costs was also the inspiration behind Mingzong’s first official decree as emperor, in which he abolished offices without real duties. Historically, appointment to sinecures sometimes served legitimate purposes in enabling emperors to pay off political debts, although the cost in terms of a bloated government at some point surpassed the benefits. Finances improved modestly with the arrival of some assets from Sichuan, initially the surplus from the Shu campaign in the summer of 926 and direct contributions to defer costs of the *Mingtang* ceremonies several years later.

But in the last years of his life, during 932 and 933, long before taking ill with apoplexy, Mingzong lavished gifts and other perquisites on assorted military leaders, the total cost of which “left the prefectural treasury nearly exhausted,” sources say.⁸¹ Many dynasties faced financial ruin due to the spending of emperors on themselves or select favorites, but Mingzong was the rare emperor who whittled down a surplus due to excessive charity for entire communities, that is, his urge to be inclusive in his charity. He may well have sought to compensate for the parsimony of the previous administration, but he clearly went too far in the other direction. The sudden drain on government coffers compromised its ability to function in the short term, but more importantly, it handicapped his successor in dealing with unforeseen challenges. This may well represent the single greatest lapse in political judgment for the entire reign. One historian attributes the fiscal improprieties of most Shatuo emperors to the absence of a distinction between public and private funds in their own culture, such that treasuries were treated like so much booty. But the improprieties of Mingzong were largely confined to one or two years, in light of reports of surplus wealth in the middle reign, so other factors must have been involved.⁸²

81. JWDS 44.606; CFYG 17.179, 54.573; ZZTJ 278.9086–87.

82. Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, p. 149.

Fiscal Commission

In the eighth month of 930, the administration introduced a historic reform in fiscal governance with the appointment of Zhang Yanlang, a Kaifeng native and former governor with extensive experience in state finances, as Fiscal Commissioner (*Sansishi*) with concurrent powers as Director of the Tax Bureau (*Hubu duzhishi*). “An accounting of the country’s resources is a crucial matter in the affairs of an empire,” the edict states in introducing the reform.⁸³ In late Tang times, three fiscal agencies were originally responsible for (1) the salt and iron monopoly, (2) the collection of taxes, and (3) and the conduct of periodic censuses. The three agencies existed separately, each with its own overseer from among the chief councilors. The reform under Mingzong brought all three organs under a single overseer who held a concurrent post in the Six Ministries.

The edict creating the office stressed the importance of finding a leader both trustworthy in deed and respected by society. Its responsibilities included monitoring government income, expenditures, fiscal planning, and population data, effectively combining the functions of several government agencies today. The reform provided the emperor a single point man for financial problems, but the panoply of responsibilities placed unreasonable demands on the administrator, derailing many promising careers in the process, starting with Ren Huan. Later in the Five Dynasties, according to Yanlang’s biography, successive candidates tried to avoid service for fear of a perilous end, an unintended consequence of this visionary reform. The *Sansi* would continue under unified supervision under the Song dynasty, another little-known contribution of Mingzong to China’s institutional evolution.

Currency

The Later Tang used copper for its currency and faced two nagging problems, the first the persistence of counterfeiting at home, and second, the circulation of foreign currencies within its own borders, especially from the south. Thus, in the twelfth month of 926, a half-year into the reign, the government mandated, “a strict proscription against cash with a heart of tin” (*laqian*), namely, counterfeit cash with a copper casing and a tin interior.⁸⁴ The price of copper seems to have risen sharply in recent years, which encouraged counterfeiters. This proscription against tin cash seems to have emanated from a broader concern about the potential for counterfeiting to compromise the empire’s economic stability.

In the third month of 927, the government attempted to fix the price of copper at the rate of two hundred strings per catty for raw copper and four hundred strings per

83. JWDS 41.567, 69.919; WDHY 24.379–80.

84. JWDS 37.514; WDHY 27.434–35.

catty for wrought copper.⁸⁵ It also imposed heavy penalties for trading above the fixed price and banned the use of copper to make other products like religious or household ornaments. Copper shortages were common throughout the Five Dynasties, when governments relied on copper to make cash and the state was in competition with religious institutions in procuring it. Three decades later, under the Later Zhou dynasty, the state resorted to far more draconian tactics, including the outright confiscation of bronze statues in Buddhist temples across the land.⁸⁶ The controls adopted by Mingzong were conservative in comparison. In all likelihood, the copper supply had been undermined by the existence of six rival regimes in the south, which allowed precious metals to cross political borders. Inevitably, inflated copper prices had the potential to wreak havoc on the economy, which explains the administration's urgency. The top-town fixing of commodity prices, as reflected in this case, was certain to fail as policy due to the inability of the Later Tang to unify the entire country. However, the savvy monarch was a master of symbolism and an ineffective mandate was better than nothing at all.

The court proscribed in the fourth month of 929 the use of "currency made of tin" (*xiqian*) from the southern state of Chu, a close ally, setting severe penalties for violations.⁸⁷ At the time, in the political heartland of the Later Tang one string of copper cash traded for one hundred strings of tin cash from Chu. Unlike the previous proscription on counterfeit cash, this proscription related to a currency composed of a combination of tin and lead and issued by the Chu government. The imposition of the ban suggests that the currencies of autonomous states in the south did circulate at some level in the Later Tang empire, despite official bans, to create serious problems for groups dependent on the currency of the imperial government to survive, particularly government monopolies and merchants.

Technology

In the sixth month of 932, the court received news from the governor of Youzhou about a major engineering feat: completion of an expanded segment of the northern stretch of the Grand Canal, a map of which was forwarded to Luoyang. The improved canal link, extending from Wangmakou to Yukou—165 *li* in length (50 miles), 65 *bu* in width (700 feet), and 12 *chi* in depth (16 feet)—could accommodate ships bearing loads of up to 1,000 piculs or roughly 130,000 pounds.⁸⁸ The Shatuo had acquired the region in 913, so construction likely began sometime later. Completion of the project toward the end of Mingzong's rule confirms ongoing investments in the country's

85. JWDS 37.508.

86. XWDS 12.xxx.

87. JWDS 40.549; ZZTJ 276.9028.

88. JWDS 43.592.

infrastructure, despite occasional instability in the northeast, including the prolonged standoff at Dingzhou, as well as Kitan harassment of the borderlands. The report on the project provides valuable information on the capacity of ships using the northernmost stretch of the Grand Canal at the time.

Monopolies

Even one of traditional China's largest cash cows, the state monopolies, came under imperial review, motivated less to generate profits than to shield violators from abuses in enforcing the pertinent regulations. The unpopular revenues official, Kong Xun, had recently executed an extended family in Luoyang for producing their own alcoholic beverages in violation of the government monopoly. The monarch, realizing that such cases were far from isolated, insisted on overhauling the entire scheme in the seventh month of 928, the third year of his reign, to permit residents of the countryside to produce or procure the yeast needed to make alcoholic beverages at home. In return, they paid a tax each autumn based on the size of their landholdings to compensate for the shortfall in revenue to the state. The reform also permitted state-owned distilleries to sell wine to the private sector in exchange for a modest fee for the yeast. The reform had been introduced briefly in the final years of the Liang dynasty, but never implemented widely.⁸⁹

In the early months of 930, the court announced a reduction by roughly forty percent in the fee that commoners paid for distiller's yeast to produce alcoholic beverages. The reduction in fees suggests that the program of deregulation had generated revenues far surpassing government projections.⁹⁰ By reducing fees, the monarch clearly sought to share the profits of the scheme with the people, rather than divert the surplus to the state treasury. The dual reforms for urban and rural areas were highly popular, "the convenience leaving the people extremely pleased."⁹¹ By the early summer of 931, the court received complaints that "the people refused to buy their distiller's yeast from official markets," creating a shortfall in revenue. Some critics proposed eliminating the reform altogether in urban areas. This appears to have ended the practice in cities, where producers could now buy yeast from the state at a substantially lower price. The fate of the program in the countryside, however, remains unclear.⁹²

At the outset of the twelfth month of 931, the government implemented a parallel economic reform by loosening the state monopoly on iron: it allowed commoners to produce their own farm implements as well as other iron-based products for daily use.⁹³ The producers were charged a fee instead, dubbed the "farm implements tax"

89. JWDS 39.539; XWDS 43.474; ZZTJ 276.9021; WDHY 26.420–21.

90. JWDS 41.560.

91. JWDS 42.578; ZZTJ 277.9059; WDHY 26.420–21.

92. JWDS 42.581; WDHY 26.421.

93. JWDS 42.583–84; ZZTJ 277.9063; Zeng Guofu, "Luclun wudai houtang," p. 3.

(*nongqiqian*), which was paid twice a year based on the size of their landholdings. The reform benefited the government by providing a steady flow of income at little cost and rural farmers by allowing them to procure this necessity more affordably from private suppliers. This was another practice from the Mingzong era that “continues to this day,” writes Ouyang Xiu in the eleventh century.⁹⁴ The Song dynasty eventually issued franchises to allow the private sector to produce controlled items like iron and implemented the policies across the country, whereas Later Tang reforms were confined to North China and likely did not extend to the empire’s peripheral lands, where local leaders must have been less cooperative.

Land

The administration of Mingzong was involved in various issues concerning land ownership, but most action aimed conservatively to protect the status quo. It issued in 930 a proscription against “officials in the capital who conceal taxable households in counties and prefectures.”⁹⁵ Presumably, registered households in rural areas were either underreported by officials or their land was erroneously represented as belonging to tax-exempt households, practices that compromised the integrity of the tax system, while providing a major source of graft. Progress in curtailing malpractices of the sort was certain to be difficult, as they were as old as the empire, but Mingzong deserves credit for confronting the problem of making tax records a more accurate reflection of real conditions of ownership in the countryside.

Another noteworthy change in fiscal administration came in the fifth and sixth months of 931 with the intent of equalizing agrarian taxes across the country (*jun min tianshui*). Details on the reform are scarce, but it was presumably designed to address the age-old problem of vast discrepancies in tax obligations from region to region due to inadequate data on landholdings.⁹⁶ Implementation of such a policy must have entailed land surveys of some sort to assess the size and productivity of registered lands, as occurred in the subsequent Song dynasty, an action that regional powerbrokers would surely have resisted as intrusive.

The administration banned “the excavation of undesignated gravesites” in the second month of 931.⁹⁷ The action suggests a fairly widespread problem of removing bodies from unmarked or unidentifiable burial lands for purposes of plunder or development, an offense against not only property rights, but society’s respect for the dead. The issue does not resurface in subsequent chapters of the Basic Annals, from which we might infer that the mandate had some efficacy in the short term. But a similar case

94. XWDS 6.63

95. JWDS 41.567.

96. ZZTJ 277.9061; JWDS 42.580.

97. JWDS 42.576; CFYG 642.7412–13.

in sources for the Song dynasty suggests that disputes over burial lands were common to all periods and any progress on the problem was certain to be temporary at best.⁹⁸

In the early months of 932, Mingzong eliminated an agency for rice production in the capital (*daotianwu*), citing the need for fiscal economy. An earlier administration, perhaps the former governor Zhang Quanyi, had set up offices for the agency south of the city wall to oversee the production of rice in the area, presumably to provide information and other supports to farmers in outlying areas. The court acknowledged that the cost of maintaining the agency, estimated at 2,700 strings of cash, far exceeded the benefits accrued, some 1,600 strings, and elected to abandon the program altogether, while covering the cost of restoring irrigation to enable farming by the private sector.⁹⁹ The decision reflects the court's ongoing scrutiny of administrative costs, even in the final years of the reign.

Horses

Early in the reign of Zhuangzong, a pasturage for horses had been launched at Xiangzhou in Henan; it was under the supervision of the Inner Asian commander Kang Fu and given the mission of augmenting the domestic supply of horses.¹⁰⁰ Mingzong contributed to the scheme in 927 by setting aside additional lands for pasturage, but he also introduced an added layer of administrative oversight by establishing an intendency for horses (*jianmusi*). A third pasturage site was apparently located in the southern Ordos region.¹⁰¹ The actions of the founding emperors suggests an ongoing concern about the quantity and quality of horses available for deployment in the field. Despite these investments, the Later Tang military found the Kitan a formidable foe, their expansion along the Great Wall permitting truly spectacular growth in horse stocks. The reticence of Mingzong to risk war with the Kitan seems informed by recognition of Later Tang vulnerability on this score. The Palace Guard under the Later Tang contained an impressive two hundred thousand men, a combination of infantry and cavalry, according to modern estimates, but its armies fought on many fronts and vulnerabilities remained.¹⁰²

A stable supply of horses needed a steady flow of imports from Tangut lands in the west, most of which entered China in the guise of tribute. But for most of Mingzong's reign, the Tangut commonly intermingled high-value horses with substandard specimens of marginal use, presenting the entire lot during tribute missions to Luoyang, where the chaotic mixture of politics and trade provided easy cover for their ruse. Their actions were tantamount to fraud as the price paid for each horse by Luoyang

98. Zhou Mi, *Guixin zashi, xuji*, p. 152.

99. JWDS 43.588; CFYG 495.5626; WXTK 7.80.

100. JWDS 91.1200; ZJTJ 275.9002.

101. Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, p. 152.

102. Zhang Qifan, *Wudai jinjun*, p. 23.

was based on preapproved agreements that assumed uniformity in supply. Moreover, a convention of long standing in the tributary system required the Chinese host to cover the expenditures of visiting embassies in the capital, especially accommodations and entertainment, a burden that became indefensible in this case. The conflation of trade with tribute had another downside for long-term residents of the capital: the plethora of animals descending on the city from every direction, especially in the ninth month when multiple embassies frequently arrived days apart, tended to create circus-like conditions that detracted from the atmosphere appropriate to the capital of the Middle Kingdom.

Once authorities threw light upon the problem of horse imports from the west, the court introduced a new policy in the fourth month of 929 allowing horses to be traded at designated places along the Tangut border, while terminating the presentation of horses in the capital.¹⁰³ In this way, the Later Tang government not only economized on a major expense, but effectively separated trade from tribute, at least in terms of horses from the Tangut. But a half-year later, the administration reverted back to the old system, ironically, at the insistence of the palace. Mingzong employed the most conventional logic in justifying his reversal: "The practices whereby barbarians tender tribute to the Middle Kingdom and We dispense largesse to them represent standard conventions for the court, a practice that should not be abandoned."¹⁰⁴ After his daring suspension of tribute in light of its inherent flaws, Mingzong ultimately defended and reinstituted the system. Perhaps some aides worried about establishing practices for one border group that could not be extended to others. More likely, the change reflects evolution: as a member of an ethnic group along China's northern border, Mingzong originally regarded tribute as principally trade, but as monarch of the Middle Kingdom, he developed a fuller appreciation of the political symbolism of tribute in validating a Sino-centric worldview, which in the process elevated him as Son of Heaven.

Mingzong had a nostalgic moment during a conversation with Fan Yanguang in the early days of the second month of 933, about the size of the horse supply, as cited in an earlier chapter. The conversation proved highly revealing about the changing ambitions of a monarch for whom historical legacy loomed large in his daily deeds. The conversation likely emanated from worries about the dynasty's ability to meet the dual threats posed by the Kitan, with their massive cavalry to the north, and autonomous states to the south and west, which required a combination of foot soldiers and sailors. The emperor had queried his military commissioner about the number of warhorses in the armed forces. "Thirty-five thousand" was Yanguang's response, which prompted Mingzong to slap his thigh and heave a heavy sigh as he questioned the real value of continued investments in the military at current levels. He finished the exchange with the following reflections:

103. JWDS 40.549; WDHY 29.462–63.

104. WDHY 29.463.

My involvement in the military has spanned forty years: since the days of Taizu at Taiyuan, when horses did not exceed seven thousand, to the time of Zhuangzong's occupation of the regions north of Yellow River and standoff with the Liang, when we had only ten thousand. We now possess thirty-five thousand horses in armor and still cannot unify the world, which suggests that we have been deficient about training commanders and soldiers alike. Alas, for an old man like me, a plenitude of horses matters little.

Trying to place a positive spin on His Majesty's apparent resignation, Yanguang interjected, "Your subject, having given considerable thought to the matter, believe that we have amassed too many horses. I once calculated that a single man outfitted for cavalry costs the equivalent of five men in boots, so with a cavalry of 35,000, we can feed an infantry of 150,000." The commissioner's comments imply a preference for concentrating on less costly infantry, consistent with historical preferences in the Middle Kingdom. But Mingzong's response served to elevate the simple exchange on strategy to a wider statement on political priorities and human values for a monarch uncomfortable with the status quo ante: "To fatten war horses, I have to starve my people—The shame is more than I can bear!"¹⁰⁵

The implication of Mingzong's final comment suggests a preference for prioritizing people over the armed forces, at least toward the end of his life, a policy already yielding fruit in the form of stability along the empire's borders and material bounty at home. But mere proclamations from the palace did not necessarily translate into a fundamental change in the direction of his administration, because investments in the military had proceeded quietly throughout the reign. The statement pertaining to the size of the Later Tang's cavalry at the time of its conquest of North China in 923, a mere ten thousand strong, serves as confirmation that the Shatuo, famed horsemen and archers, actually conquered the country largely on the backs of its infantry. A cavalry of thirty-five thousand by the end of Mingzong's reign represents three-fold growth in the short span of a decade, the product of policies begun by his predecessor, to be sure, but never curtailed in meaningful ways under him.¹⁰⁶

105. JWDS 44.601–02; XWDS 51.577; *Beimeng suoyan* 20.353; CFYG 484.5494. This concluding line by Mingzong comes from the biography of Fan Yanguang in the *Historical Records*, which varies slightly in the *Old History*, which reads "To fatten horses I have to starve my people. What benefit lies in this!"

106. Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, p. 152.

Chapter 6

Volatile Periphery

The Shatuo-Kitan Rivalry

Among the five dynasties to rule North China, the Later Tang had the most extensive contacts with countries along the northern border, where the politics of tribute was commonly conflated with the business of trade. Commerce contributed to the dynasty's economic development, while providing steady supplies of the necessities of Shatuo life—horses, hunting animals, furs, and other commodities in short supply in the Chinese heartland. The demand for northern imports had surely expanded due to the substantial consumption demands of a ruling class with origins in Inner Asia that subsequently relocated to the central plains. The conduct of regular diplomatic and trade relations with its neighbors was critical to maintaining the prosperity of the Later Tang dynasty while legitimizing Shatuo rule. The dynasty retained the overall structure of the tributary system of Tang times, although Mingzong did introduce some historic adjustments in their management, as seen in the preceding chapter.

Of the various neighboring states, none presented a greater threat to Shatuo power than the Kitan kingdom.¹ In the late ninth century, the Shatuo and the Kitan were allied through oaths between their founding fathers, Li Keyong and Abaoji, an alliance that faltered in the final years of Keyong's life. The Kitan shifted ties to the Liang dynasty during the reign of Zhu Wen, relations that deteriorated after the death of the Liang founder in 912.² Keyong's successor, Li Cunxu, lived under his father's dying wish to exact revenge for the lack of good faith on the part of the Kitan. He refused to act immediately upon that wish for practical reasons, namely, the greater threat posed by the Liang dynasty to his south. But when the Kitan decided to besiege Youzhou in 917, land acquired by the Shatuo years earlier, they triggered direct conflict with the Jin kingdom for the first time in a generation. Cunxu dispatched adopted brother Li Siyuan to command the relief operation at Yan, an action that succeeded in delivering one of the Jin satrapy's most decorated commanders, Zhou Dewei, from immanent

1. The Kitan established Liao as their dynastic name in 947, after the death of Mingzong, so the dynastic name is not employed here.

2. WDHY 29.455. On Later Tang relations with the Kitan during the reign of Mingzong, see Wang Gungwu, *Divided China*, pp. 148–54.

peril.³ Siyuan was also involved in routing Kitan armies at Zhuozhou in 925, following their penetration of the border.⁴ Their first diplomatic outreach to the Later Tang in a decade occurred in early 925 and again in early 926, the last days of Zhuangzong's reign, likely with the intent of ameliorating tensions. By the time he acceded as emperor, Mingzong knew the region and its problem well enough to move decisively in shifting from a policy of intermittent conflict to coexistence by regularizing diplomacy and commerce.

Arriving in the capital during the summer months of 926 were envoys for the Kitan ruler Abaoji, the second northern leader to render felicitations to the new Son of Heaven.⁵ The Kitan were concluding a bitter war against Parhae, which had cultivated closer relations with Luoyang as a wedge against its primary enemy. Diplomacy on the part of the Kitan was likely used to encourage the Later Tang to retain its policy of neutrality in the Liaodong peninsula. The parts of Parhae conquered by the Kitan, given the name Dongdan, came to be governed by Tuyu, eldest son of Abaoji, as the King of Dongdan.⁶ It was common knowledge that Abaoji held Zhuangzong in high personal regard, once referring to him as "brother," so he turned emotional upon learning of his untimely death. Based on his first communication with Mingzong, the Kitan leader possessed some knowledge of Zhuangzong's many deficiencies, including his artistic indulgences and neglect of governance.⁷ Abaoji thus chose to extend a hand of friendship to China's new ruler: "I have no personal animosity toward the new Son of Heaven and look forward to restoring cordial relations."⁸ Mingzong must have been a legendary figure among the Kitan in his day, having vanquished their armies on multiple occasions.

Tragically, the Kitan leader died in the seventh month of 926 at fifty-five *sui*, the same month that his envoy arrived at Luoyang, so early diplomatic contacts between the two powers at this time of political change was largely ceremonial in nature. Mingzong received news of Abaoji's passing three months after the event and suspended audience for a day. He even characterized the dead man as a "great ally," ignoring two decades of intermittent conflict between the two states.⁹ The Kitan leadership wisely sidestepped Abaoji's lackluster eldest son, Tuyu, in favor of second son Yelü Deguang, then twenty-seven *sui* and at the peak of his physical and mental powers. In years to come, Deguang would prove a worthy rival to Mingzong, a man more than twice his age.

The spirits of Emperor Mingzong reached an unexpected high in the tenth month of 926 with the first political defection from Kitan lands since his accession, Lu Wenjin. A

3. JWDS 35.485–86.

4. JWDS 35.487; *Liao shi* 3.27; WDHY 29.456.

5. JWDS 36.501.

6. ZZTJ 275.8988–89.

7. Mote, *Imperial China*, pp. 46–47; *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 6, pp. 66–69; ZZTJ 275.8989.

8. ZZTJ 275.8989

9. JWDS 37.512.

Han Chinese ethnic some seven feet in height, Wenjin had served the Yan satrapy under Liu Shouguang before converting to the Shatuo of Hedong, subsequently rising to be prefect of Shouzhou. He grew increasingly alienated over the course of Zhuangzong's reign due to distant assignments for his men and personal frictions with an abusive imperial brother. Wenjin thus fled to the Kitan for sanctuary, subsequently earning their trust by teaching them the latest techniques in textile production. He would rise to chief of defenses at Pingzhou before reverting to the Later Tang some years later, allegedly after special outreach from Mingzong.¹⁰ Multiple sources report an entourage in excess of one hundred thousand, a figure without doubt greatly embellished. In the early days of the twelfth month, Wenjin's group reached Luoyang, where the monarch extended personal greetings to him and an entourage of four hundred lieutenants. The palace also lavished upon the leading defectors bounty that included strings of cash and coveted jade belts, while elevating Wenjin to Generalissimo (*Shangjiangjun*).¹¹ A sizable cluster of émigrés chose to stay at Zhenzhou, where the central government would remit "rental taxes" for the next three years to defer resettlement costs, a sign of the size of the refugee population.¹²

The Kitan ambassador, Meilao Mogu, led a sizable mission in tribute during the ninth month of 927.¹³ There had been border tensions with the Kitan in recent months, causing Mingzong to dispatch to the region the decorated commander Wu Zhen, along with reinforcements from other commands, to restore order. Mogu was the first Kitan ambassador to appear in the Later Tang capital since hostilities had erupted. Mingzong nonetheless responded positively by approving a return mission. There were reports of a Kitan request in the previous month to establish a trading station (or stations) along the border, most likely to replace some of the region's tribute to the capital.¹⁴ Luoyang apparently failed to respond positively to the initiative, as the request was repeated in subsequent years. Kitan envoys returned to the Later Tang capital toward the end of 927, allowing Mingzong to bestow a rare combination of gifts that included an embroidered quilt for the Empress Dowager.¹⁵ He may well have been trying to compensate for spurning the offer for direct trade along the border.

A delegation dispatched by the widow of Abaoji, the Shulü Dowager, and led by Turui Beimeilao, reached the capital in the first month of 928. Mingzong reciprocated with his own mission led by Ben Tuoshan, a man likely of Inner Asian ancestry based on his name. He carried a personal letter from the Later Tang monarch to the Empress Dowager of the north.¹⁶ Such high-level exchanges proceeded, despite occasional raids

10. JWDS 37.512; XWDS 48.539–40; ZZTJ 275.8994; Standen, *Unbounded Loyalty*, pp. 72–74.

11. CFYG 111.1207; ZZTJ 275.8994.

12. JWDS 37.513.

13. JWDS 38.528; ZZTJ 275.9001, 276.9009.

14. JWDS 38.526.

15. JWDS 38.530; CFYG 976.11300.

16. JWDS 39.534; CFYG 976.11300. The Kitan capital at the time, Shangjing, was located over six

by the Kitan against Pingzhou, a city recently acquired by the Later Tang through the defection of Lu Wenjin. Regarding the land as their own, the Kitan were determined to reclaim it.¹⁷ Months later, the northerners dispatched representatives to Youzhou to procure musical instruments.¹⁸ The Kitan surely had access to a variety of musical instruments from Inner Asia, like the three-string Hunnish fiddle or the Tibetan flute, instruments popular with the Shatuo at the time, but Chinese music was presumably the Dowager's favorite.¹⁹ These growing political and economic contacts suggest an appreciable thaw in relations between the two neighbors due to the propensity of leaders to separate short-term conflicts from shared interests over the long term.

The court received news of a mutiny in the northeast led by Wang Du, the governor of the strategic Ding prefecture in the fourth month of 928.²⁰ "A wily man of endless intrigue," according to the *Historical Records*, Du seized power by incarcerating his own father and purging the local potentate along with his male heirs.²¹ Despite his reprehensible ways, Du quickly became a valued asset to Zhuangzong, who indulged his excesses and arranged a marriage between the daughter of Wang Du and his own eldest son, Jiji. Initially, Du appears to have embraced Mingzong as sovereign, albeit grudgingly as might be expected for an in-law of the deposed emperor. At the same time, Du's reputation for arrogance and profligacy ran against the policies of the new administration, and especially the highly exacting An Chonghui. For the past nine years, Du had succeeded in retaining his governorship, an indulgence that ran against the important policy of rotation that the court expected elsewhere. The Dingzhou governor was simply too influential to propose reassignment, so Mingzong initially attempted to sway him through titular honors, including investiture as Prince of Taiyuan, with little success. Du rebelled all the same, doubtless in reaction to the recall of Wang Jianli as governor of neighboring Zhenzhou, a command now under the grip of Fan Yanguang, a more effective defender of imperial interests.

In the wake of the insurgency at Dingzhou in the fourth month, the court mobilized a group of stellar professionals for the suppression led by Wang Yanqiu, the Songzhou governor, and assisted by An Shentong, the Cangzhou governor. The Later Tang also drew upon surplus troops at nearby Youzhou and Lutai, where forces had been deployed in the past year due to border raids and local tensions. Fan Yanguang was also en route to the area in his capacity as Zhenzhou governor. It was common knowledge that Du had tried to rally the governors of five neighboring commands to

hundred kilometers north of the Chinese border. In all likelihood, Later Tang envoys visited venues closer to the Chinese border like the "southern capital." Sources fail to specify the destination of this particular envoy.

17. WDHY 29.457.

18. JWDS 39.537.

19. Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers*, p. 155.

20. JWDS 39.537–38; XWDS 39.422; ZTJ 276.9017–18; CFYG 123.1345.

21. XWDS 39.422.

his cause, sufficient reason to consider him a serious menace, even though none of the governors responded positively in the end. Due to the proximity of Dingzhou to the Kitan border, anxieties about a possible intervention from abroad, as had occurred in the previous reign, created additional angst for the administration. But the most formidable obstacle to Later Tang armies were the sturdy walls and strong defenses of Dingzhou, which meant that the suppression would likely take many months, if not years. Du also proved masterful at thwarting his foes within by unleashing hordes of spies to purge the city of potential defectors. "He conducted intensive spying to detect commanders wishing to surrender, not a day passing without suspects being murdered or massacred," sources say.²² Du had survived as satrap partly through intimidation of this sort and partly by adapting to changing conditions. He could never win a war against the government, but he had the means to put up a long and costly fight.

Over the course of the fifth month of 928, government forces at Dingzhou made important inroads.²³ They succeeded in regaining control of surrounding lands to cut off supplies and encircle the city. However, the ever-resourceful Wang Du had managed to strengthen Dingzhou's defenses, while securing military backing from Xi tribesmen in the northeast (a people allied with the Kitan), who committed a force of some ten thousand men led by Tunei.²⁴ The Kitan themselves soon joined the fray by backing Wang Du and committing a cavalry of over five thousand to the region. Their intervention laid the ground for the first direct military confrontation in the Chinese interior between the Shatuo and the Kitan since Mingzong's accession two years earlier. Previous engagements had been confined to the borderlands. However, separating Kitan bases from the city of Dingzhou were buffer cities like Youzhou and Yizhou, cities that formed a solid line of defense to the north of Dingzhou in the vicinity of modern Beijing. So long as these buffer cities remained under the control of locals loyal to the throne, the Kitan could only relieve Dingzhou by taking more circuitous routes that wasted time and resources. For this reason, any intervention was likely to end badly.

The highly disciplined Later Tang commander Wang Yanqiu delivered a lethal blow to the Dingzhou upstarts at Quyang county, partly by threatening death to cowards in his own ranks. Before long, the Xi and Kitan mercenaries retreated to the north, their ranks thinned by as much as fifty percent. The Kitan returned to Dingzhou with another seven thousand reinforcements in the middle of the sixth month of 928, but Later Tang armies inflicted heavy casualties due to persistent rains that deprived Kitan horsemen of food and rendered their cavalry immobile.²⁵ The Later Tang command further isolated Dingzhou insurgents by seizing satellite towns to the northeast like

22. XWDS 39.422.

23. JWDS 39.538.

24. JWDS 39.538–29; ZZTJ 276.9018–19. Inasmuch as these two sources differ on the size of Kitan armies at Dingzhou, I have followed the ZZTJ.

25. ZZTJ 276.9021–22.

Wangdu. Meanwhile, the Youzhou governor Zhao Dejun, a man native to the region, proved unflappable, forcing a pushback by Kitan mercenaries in the area.²⁶ The emperor issued a special citation honoring Dejun's devotion to country after his men beheaded over a thousand Kitan warriors in the suburbs of Youzhou and laid claim to six hundred head of horses.²⁷ Later Tang armies had managed to capture an eminent cluster of Kitan commanders as well, delivering a serious blow to their prestige.²⁸

The Later Tang command in the field was initially divided over whether to proceed with a full siege of Dingzhou's formidable walls, an action opposed by chief commander Wang Yanqiu, but supported by deputy commander Zhu Hongzhao. Under mounting pressure from colleagues in the field and strategists in the capital, Yanqiu proceeded with the siege. Ultimately, the superior coordination of Later Tang armies, combined with the good fortune of accommodating weather, produced by the seventh month of 928 an even more decisive rout for the Kitan, "causing them never again to attempt frivolous raids against the border," writes Sima Guang in the *Comprehensive Mirror*, at least not so long as Mingzong was alive.²⁹ Several thousand Kitan warriors had been captured, the bulk of whom were beheaded. In victory, Mingzong refused to gloat, but instead proved somewhat subdued in commenting on the fifty Kitan captives, whose lives he chose to spare for a combination of strategic and charitable reasons:

These men are among the most valorous of enemy commanders. By killing them, I could dash the present promise of the Kitan. But it is better to keep them alive and thereby diminish the potential calamity of a future war.³⁰

Perhaps Mingzong saw the captives as bargaining chips in negotiations with the north, but more likely he regarded their captivity as a living testament to the scope of the Later Tang victory and a powerful disincentive for the north to assume mercenary tasks of the sort in the future.

From war, the court's attention shifted to diplomacy in the early days of 931 with the defection to the Middle Kingdom of Tuyu, the Prince of Dongdan. Despite standing as the eldest son of Abaoji, Tuyu had been passed over in the succession in favor of Yelü Deguang, creating a wholly understandable sense of alienation. Tuyu undoubtedly also worried about the safety of himself and his family as exiles in Dongdan. They fled south instead with a massive retinue by the dangerous sea route.³¹ The Kitan prince presented three seals of Kitan office during his first imperial audience. Mingzong was sufficiently impressed by the man and flattered by the defection to extend the audience

26. JWDS 39.539.

27. JWDS 39.541.

28. CFYG 45.494.

29. ZZTJ 276.9022.

30. ZZTJ 276.9022.

31. JWDS 42.575–76, 582; XWDS 56.645; ZZTJ 277.9057, 9061, 9067–68; CFYG 114.1247, 170.1897; *Liao shi* 3.32, 72.1209–11.

by some time, then lavished bounty that included three hundred bolts of silk gauze and a generous gratuity. The palace also granted a governorship at Huazhou, while bestowing the Chinese name Dongdan Muhua, later changed to Li Zanhua. A month later, the emperor favored Tuyu with a personal visit at his residence in the Luoyang suburbs, a rare honor for a foreign guest. Mingzong extended further favors for Tuyu by providing a Chinese consort, Woman Xia, a one-time concubine of his predecessor, Zhuangzong, which immediately elevated the social standing of the expatriate within the capital.³²

An aficionado of Chinese arts and culture, the Prince of Dongdan was famed for his paintings, including several self-portraits spuriously attributed to him: the uniformed subject with light beard, slight build, and fine facial features.³³ Mingzong's extraordinary bounty for a deposed contender to the Kitan throne had the potential of problematizing Later Tang relations with the real powerbroker for the north, Yelü Deguang. Domestically, the emperor's embrace of Zanhua met with fairly wide resistance from some advisors who feared he might be a spy; others considered his résumé too thin to merit high office. The imperfections of the man would surface in due time, as reflected in his disinterest in governing and sadistic abuse of his new consort, who later sued for divorce, but the value of this defection for the political standing of the Later Tang was beyond measure. The flight of Tuyu must be understood in the context of the previous defection of Lu Wenjin, whose flight to China with a retinue of thousands must have been a public scandal for their homeland, and especially the vast armies deployed along the border charged with keeping outsiders out and insiders in. Worse yet, two prominent defections in the span of several years were certain to encourage others to follow suit.

The bulk of defections along the border with the Kitan were largely in one direction, north to south, with one prominent exception. In the eleventh month of 932, the prefect of Weizhou (southern Hedong), Zhang Yanchao, absconded for Kitan lands; this created something of a political tremor at home, inasmuch as Yanchao was a Shatuo ethnic and the adopted son of Mingzong. It was frictions with Shi Jingtang over many years that incited him to betray his own people, on the heels of Jingtang's reassignment to the Shanxi homeland. Yanchao clearly perceived his local interests as threatened by the presence of the imperial son-in-law in his own backyard.³⁴ The Kitan rewarded Yanchao with installation as the Datong governor, thereby complicating Jingtang's own mission by a considerable measure.

During the last years of Mingzong's reign, the Kitan remained scrupulous about diplomatic contacts with Luoyang, sending tribute several times in the year 932.³⁵ A

32. *Beimeng suoyan* 18.335.

33. The Metropolitan Museum argues that the self-portrait attributed to Li Zanhua was the work of a Song painter, Huang Zongtao; see Fong, *Beyond Representation*, pp. 31–34.

34. ZZTJ 278.9080; Standen, *Unbounded Loyalty*, pp. 158–59.

35. JWDS 43.587, 589.

key motivating factor was the priority attached to repatriating Zela, the commander captured by Later Tang armies several years earlier during the Dingzhou suppression. Kitan emissaries had pressed repeatedly for his return and Mingzong initially appeared amenable, only to change course after consulting senior officers in the northeast like Zhao Dejun and Yang Guangyuan, who cited the threat to Later Tang security interests. Dejun, the Youzhou governor, saw the captives as invaluable assets of war, too valuable indeed to release: “The Kitan have recently refrained from raiding the border, making repeated overtures for peace instead, for the simple reason that men like Zela are held captive in the south. If we allow his return, tumult in the borderlands will surely resume.”³⁶ The assumption behind the statement, namely, that the Kitan were the implacable rivals of the government in Luoyang, had not been borne out by history: in the five years preceding the Dingzhou intervention, the Kitan had largely avoided border conflict.³⁷ Nonetheless, Guangyuan concurred with the Youzhou governor, comparing the loss of Zela to “losing one’s arms or feet,” a fatal blow to Kitan ambitions in the region that could be easily reversed by the wrong decision. Mingzong thus declined to repatriate Zela, releasing instead a lesser figure, Cegu Sheli, as a token of goodwill.³⁸

Nanping

One of the more cantankerous of the aligned states along the southern border during Mingzong’s reign happened to be the smallest state in the south, Nanping (also known as Jingnan), situated along the Yangzi river near the Three Gorges.³⁹ Founder Gao Jixing (858–928) had grown up as a household servant in Kaifeng, and was later adopted into the imperial clan of the Liang dynasty. Jixing rose to become prefect of Songzhou and then governor of Jingnan due to a combination of cunning and determination. His personal ties to the Liang dynasty were certain to leave him suspect after the Later Tang supplanted the dynasty. Indeed, Zhuangzong invited the Nanping governor to the capital in the eleventh month of 923, the governor agreeing to make the trip against the advice of aides worried about his possible retention. But the potential benefits of starting off on good terms with the new overlords of the Middle Kingdom seemed worth the risk. Jixing was feted by Zhuangzong during his stay in the capital, only to face assassins on the highway as he journeyed home. Miraculously, he outwitted his pursuers to return safely, but now with a just grievance against the Later Tang. The experience prompted Jixing to strengthen local armies on the assumption of certain

36. ZZTJ 277.9067; JWDS 43.591.

37. WDHY 29.456–57.

38. ZZTJ 277.9072; JWDS 43.591.

39. JWDS 133.1751–56; XWDS 69.855–61; SGCQ 100.1427–38, 101.1439–40.

conflict. In the interim, the two sides feigned cordial relations, the government investing Jixing as Prince of Nanping in 925.

During the potentate's visit to the capital in 923, Zhuangzong divulged plans for military action against either Wu or Shu, depending upon which foe was more vulnerable. The cunning Jixing portrayed Shu as the weaker foe and offered to deploy armies from Nanping to attack the area from the east, expecting to exploit the ensuing vacuum to encroach upon neighboring lands. As the war against Shu unfolded in late 925 and early 926, Nanping failed to deliver on its promised action, yet it pressed Luoyang all the same to cede a cluster of prefectures east of modern Chongqing—Kuizhou, Zhongzhou, and Wanzhou—based on some pre-war promises. The cities had already been occupied by Later Tang armies and advisors to Zhuangzong strongly opposed the concession, opposition that continued after Mingzong acceded to the throne and An Chonghui became military commissioner. The court revisited the petition to cede the three prefectures in the sixth month.⁴⁰ Mingzong had every reason to decline the request, but he ultimately conceded in hopes of improving currently strained relations with the state, which shared a short but strategic border with the Later Tang. The accommodation must have infuriated An Chonghui, whose posturing as pertains to the southern states invariably placed principle before compromise.

The administration was compelled to respond more aggressively against Nanping starting in the second month of 927, after Gao Jixing murdered a succession of transportation officers dispatched by Luoyang to negotiate outstanding matters, including the plunder of northern ships heading east along the Yangzi River. And when the Later Tang government pressed for an explanation for the drowning of its sailors amidst the plunder by Nanping, Jixing responded flippantly, "You should ask the Water Spirits!"⁴¹ Conditions now demanded a firm hand. Mingzong began by installing his own prefects for the three contested cities in eastern Sichuan in affirmation of Luoyang's de facto control over them. Jixing subsequently seized one of these cities, Kuizhou, to expel the court-appointed overseer. He also raided the Yangzi River town of Fuzhou, which had been in Later Tang hands since the conquest of Shu a year earlier, an act of still greater brazenness.

Such arrogance from a former tributary state could not go unpunished, so Luoyang unleashed a suppression army of forty thousand, including the country's most heralded Inner Asian fighters, the multi-ethnic armies, led by Liu Xun and Xia Luqi.⁴² Mingzong further enlisted its steady ally, Chu, to apply pressure against Nanping from the south, while deploying Later Tang armies in eastern Sichuan to apply pressure from the west. The three-pronged assault seemed deft as strategy, but coordinating the actions of several regional leaders, many with questionable loyalties to the court, presented

40. JWDS 36.501; ZZTJ 275.8987–88; SGCQ 100.1434.

41. ZZTJ 275.9002; SGCQ 100.1435.

42. JWDS 38.520; ZZTJ 275.9002; SGCQ 100.1434–36; CFYG 123.1344, 136.1516.

unforeseen challenges. Heavy rains in the vicinity of Jiangling, the Nanping capital, took their toll on Later Tang armies, whose supply lines were disrupted. Meanwhile, the crafty Nanping governor had succeeded in enlisting nominal support from the state of Wu, Luoyang's erstwhile enemy. These various factors enabled the tiny kingdom to beat back the infinitely larger and better-equipped forces from the north, but armies led by men with negligible experience in naval warfare. After four frustrating months, the court decided to recall most of its assets. Frictions persisted with Nanping for over a year, albeit on a smaller scale. The three prefectures formerly relinquished to Nanping were regained by Later Tang armies, the only positive outcome of the intervention, which on balance represented an enormous loss of face for the Son of Heaven.

Gao Jixing died in the twelfth month of 928 and his son, Gao Conghui, moved quickly to normalize relations with the north by rendering a formal apology in the fifth month of 929.⁴³ He also conveyed to the capital some three thousand ounces of silver in tribute.⁴⁴ The thirty-nine-year-old had vigorously opposed his father's unwinnable war, recognizing that sharing a strategic border with the Later Tang necessitated amicable relations. Conghui had also faced mounting military pressure from Later Tang armies to the north and Chu mercenaries to the south, an additional incentive to end hostilities. He had first approached Luoyang informally through diplomatic channels; Mingzong dickered for many months, then responded positively by reconfirming Conghui as the Jingnan governor. In this way, the Later Tang managed to conclude a conflict that had distracted it from the enemy within, Shu.

Sichuan in Revolt

The conquest of Sichuan in the previous reign has been discussed in Chapter 2 on Siyuan's regency. This section focuses on developments after his accession. The vast wealth retrieved from Sichuan in the early spring of 926, a sizable portion of the two million strings of cash and half-million bolts of silk originally confiscated at Chengdu, had been largely plundered by military authorities at the western capital of Changan in the early months of 926.⁴⁵ By the fifth month, the Later Tang court had received from Sichuan a paltry one hundred fifty horses, two royal belts of jade and two belts composed of rhinoceros horn. Mingzong might well have punished the governor of Changan for presiding over the plunder of Shu riches during their passage through the region, but chose otherwise.⁴⁶ He preferred to pick his fights wisely and the first year in power was the wrong time to challenge entrenched governors in the west. The court presented peace offerings instead.

43. ZZTJ 276.9025–26.

44. JWDS 40.550–51; ZZTJ 276.9030.

45. XWDS 24.250.

46. JWDS 36.498.

In the summer of 926, the court bestowed the highest of titular honors, the title of Grand Mentor (*Taifu*), upon the two leading governors in the Shu theater, Meng Zhixiang in the west and Dong Zhang in the east.⁴⁷ The two men had been originally deployed by Zhuangzong to secure the area after the execution of Guo Chongtao earlier in the year, so honors from the new sovereign signaled his commitment to the status quo in terms of administrative oversight for the region. The men had inherited the vast armies, arsenals, and treasuries of a region that, if not sufficiently coddled, might well create frictions in the future, and titular honors came at little cost.⁴⁸

Another symbolic move of the new administration in the tenth month of 926 involved the dispatch of an administrator to Western Chuan, the base of Meng Zhixiang, to increase the region's contribution to coffers in the capital. Fiscal Commissioner Ren Huan, a veteran of the Shu campaign a year earlier, had long recognized the need for the government to tap into the stupendous wealth of the region, especially the western circuit centering on a populous and prosperous Chengdu, partly to enforce Shu's conformity to taxing policies elsewhere and partly to limit the resources under the direct control of the region's two governors. To this end, Huan dispatched to Chengdu an administrator from the salt and iron monopoly, Zhao Jiliang, intent on installing him as transportation commissioner with oversight over local revenues. The government had inherited a treasury in dire need of replenishing, while sacrifices in the southern suburbs planned for 928 promised to strain resources still further. Attempts to impose a financial overseer were received skeptically by Zhixiang, who insisted, "The riches of the Shu treasury were largely plundered [during the conquest of 925]. Take what you will of what remains, but the tax receipts collected from prefectures and counties are needed to provision our armed forces, a force of a hundred thousand. Under no circumstances can these revenues be touched."⁴⁹ A hard line had been drawn on the matter.

As governor of western Sichuan, known as Xichuan, Meng Zhixiang had grown increasingly unpredictable. He began taking actions such as the appointment of local officials without first vetting the nominations with the court as required by law. Mingzong could never be wholly confident in Zhixiang's loyalties to his own administration due to close ties to his predecessor. Chief Councilor Ren Huan had his own suspicions, having witnessed the steady buildup of wealth and armaments under Zhixiang in the two years since his arrival in the region.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, the Shu governor did allow the government's taxman to access reserves in the treasury of the deposed ruler of the region, a sum large enough to temporarily replenish coffers in Luoyang.⁵¹ In this

47. JWDS 36.501.

48. On the military assets inherited by Meng Zhixiang, see ZZTJ 275.8991.

49. ZZTJ 275.8994–97.

50. XWDS 64.798–99.

51. ZZTJ 275.8997.

way the administration saved face by tapping into a portion of the Shu treasury, while Zhixiang retained personal control over the much larger pool of regular tax receipts.

In the first month of 927, the court applied additional pressure upon Western Chuan by trying to appoint a military inspector in the person of Li Yan, a seasoned diplomat. Scarcely two years earlier, Yan had revealed to Zhuangzong the vulnerability of Shu to outside intervention after concluding a mission to the region, his words setting the stage for the demise of the Former Shu as an independent state.⁵² The symbolism was not lost upon Meng Zhixiang, who took the imposition of an inspector as a personal affront, for Mingzong had already eliminated inspectorships for other areas. Thus, upon reaching Chengdu, Li Yan, a former associate of Zhixiang, was treated cordially by him at the outset, only for the governor to launch into a hard-nosed interrogation of the diplomat to clarify his intentions:

You were once sent as emissary to Wang Yan [Emperor of Former Shu], then returned north to rally around a campaign against Shu. Emperor Zhuangzong took your advice, which ultimately brought about the demise of both rulers. As you appear once again in this region, the people of Shu are apprehensive. Inspectors across the world have been recalled in their entirety, so why does the court insist on imposing an inspector over my command and mine alone?⁵³

Before the banquet had finished, Zhixiang brutally murdered his guest in a fit of fury, insisting that Yan had failed to follow the instructions of his own court. The unwarranted slaying so terrified Yang Lingzhi, another diplomat en route to the region, that he aborted his trip to return north. The deputy commissioner for neighboring Eastern Chuan, Zhu Hongzhao, also came close to abandoning his post upon learning of Yan's death.⁵⁴ Perhaps the governors of Shu were merely testing the limits of court tolerance, in which case the times demanded a firm response. Sadly, the exact opposite would occur.

Despite his daring acts of insubordination, Meng Zhixiang still managed in coming years to relocate to Shu the bulk of his dependents from the family estate in the north, including his Shatuo wife, the Qionghua Senior Princess, and the couple's eldest son, Meng Renzan. As the niece of Mingzong's adopted father, Li Keyong, the princess and her offspring were unlikely targets of retaliation in any case. Several local leaders considered intercepting Zhixiang's dependents during their long passage from Shanxi to Sichuan, sources say, only to desist on orders from the capital. The court subsequently dispatched to Chengdu the more conciliatory Li Renju with the charge of addressing outstanding issues. Minzgong even approved the appointment of Zhao Jiliang, the crony nominated by Zhixiang, as deputy governor for Western Chuan, forfeiting

52. XWDS 26.284–85.

53. ZZTJ 275.8999–9000.

54. ZZTJ 275.9000.

another tool of coercion against him.⁵⁵ The coddling of Zhixiang represented a considered effort to distance the current administration from the previous reign, which had constantly overreacted to events in the southwest. But the dual messages emanating from Luoyang, sending military inspectors to intimidate, on the one hand, while allowing the transfer of dependents, on the other, merely served to postpone the inevitable split. The see-saw in Shu policy is often attributed to differences between a pliant monarch and his hardline military commissioner, which may be partially true. But admittedly, the alternatives for dealing with Shu were equally unappealing, short of war.

As the court equivocated, Meng Zhixiang moved to buttress his control over Western Chuan through infrastructural supports. He deployed a reputed 200,000 conscript workers to rebuild the walls of Chengdu. Since the reign of Zhuangzong, the court had tried to restrict major investments in fortifications along city walls, convinced that weaker defenses for cities in the locales worked to the advantage of the central government, should it need to intervene militarily. The refurbishing of walls and fortifications around Chengdu on this scale thus flaunted government restrictions.⁵⁶ Without question, Zhixiang had begun to lay the foundation for a permanent presence in Shu within a year after arriving in the region. The installation of a new administration in Luoyang, rather than slowing him down, actually hastened his pace.

Additional frictions with Meng Zhixiang emerged in the sixth month of 928. The government had sought to station one of Zhixiang's military units at Kuizhou, one of the three cities formerly contested by Nanping but recovered by Later Tang armies earlier in the year. Zhixiang initially complied by dispatching an underling, Mao Chongwei, with a force of three thousand men. Fearing that an extended assignment in the area might cause him to lose personal control over the unit, Zhixiang petitioned the capital: "Kuizhou, Zhongzhou, and Wanzhou have already been pacified. I seek the court's permission to withdraw my own unit to save on the conveyance of rations."⁵⁷ Once the palace rejected his petition, Zhixiang directed Chongwei to evacuate troops without authorization. When the court responded by warning Chongwei of potential punitive measures, Zhixiang summarily pronounced immunity for his lieutenant, leaving the court without recourse as Chongwei withdrew. This is another case where the palace placated Zhixiang like no other local potentate, each indulgence undermining Luoyang's credibility as a government of laws rather than men.

In preparation for rites in the southern suburbs, an exercise originally slated for 928 but subsequently deferred for two years, the court found itself groveling for special subsidies from Sichuan.⁵⁸ To this end, it dispatched in the sixth month of 929 the

55. ZZTJ 275.9004–05.

56. ZZTJ 276.9011.

57. ZZTJ 276.9020.

58. ZZTJ 276.9029–30; JWDS 40.550, 94.1256.

commissioner of the Visitors' Bureau (*keshengshi*), Li Renju, to press for one million strings of cash from Western Chuan and a half-million strings from the eastern circuit. Renju was known as a loyal lieutenant of Mingzong during his days as governor and a personal friend of An Chonghui, connections that inflated his sense of self-importance and left him officious in the discharge of his duties. During his short stay in Eastern Chuan, Renju infuriated the local governor, Dong Zhang, when he lingered at an inn to savor the wine and women provided by his hosts and arrived churlishly late for dinner. In the course of their meeting, Governor Dong roundly reviled Renju for his infelicities and nearly slew him on the spot, although he elected instead to return Renju with a contribution small enough to offend the Son of Heaven. Once back at court, the emissary would charge Zhixiang with "behaving improperly," marking a turn in official opinion against him.

The capital later dispatched to Eastern Chuan another lackluster favorite to reopen discussions, Receptions Officer Li Yanxun, but he received a similarly cold reception by Dong Zhang, who charged the envoy with violating protocols. Several members of Yanxun's entourage even suffered the indignity of house arrest. The receptions officer returned abruptly to Luoyang, his report further inflaming hostilities against the Eastern Chuan regime. In contrast, the governor of Western Chuan, Meng Zhixiang, responded more positively by promising a half-million cash strings as subsidy for the ceremonies, half the sum demanded by the government, but enough to silence hard-line policymakers at court. In private, Zhixiang charged Luoyang with conspiring to impoverish him. The third court emissary to Shu, Zhang Zunhui, proved to be another military man closely tied to the palace, background that immediately discredited him in the eyes of the already jaded governors. Nothing had been learned from the two previous missions, which set the new envoy up for similar failure.⁵⁹

Upon the death of Li Yan, the government refused to send an envoy or even appoint a prefect to Shu without providing a military escort of five hundred men, due to the caprice of the region's governors.⁶⁰ By the end of 929, however, the court reinserted itself into Shu politics by naming Li Renju, an imperial intimate, as governor of Langzhou and Wu Qianyu, a cousin of An Chonghui, as prefect of Mianzhou, cities a hundred or so kilometers north of Chengdu. The court also dispatched the senior commander Xia Luqi, with the reputed mission of "rebuilding fortifications" at Suizhou. The recent escalation of military and political pressures against Shu were not lost upon its governors, former rivals who now entered an informal alliance that began with the son of Dong Zhang marrying the daughter of Meng Zhixiang.⁶¹ Sources say that the suspicions of Chonghui focused principally on the governor of Eastern Chuan, but the governor of Western Chuan, with whom he had shared a long professional association,

59. JWDS 40.551; ZZTJ 276.9029–30; XWDS 64.800–01.

60. ZZTJ 278.9076.

61. ZZTJ 276.9029, 9037; XWDS 64.798–99.

was seen as a friend of the court. Suspicions of Dong Zhang created a greater dependency on Zhixiang, making the administration well prepared for a showdown with Eastern Chuan, but taken aback by a coordinated challenge from a united Shu, which is precisely how events unfolded.

The two prefectures in Western Chuan, Lizhou and Langzhou, were overrun by the governor of the east, Dong Zhang, in the ninth month of 930, after the court attempted to insert an army into his bailiwick.⁶² The move was intended to prevent northern armies from penetrating the Shu heartland, an action covertly supported by Meng Zhixiang. The court summarily stripped Dong Zhang of all titles and some days later executed his kinsmen then residing in the capital, including Zhang's wife and at least one son, along with the son's wife. The government also began the process of enlisting men for the suppression, including Zhixiang, who replaced Zhang as logistics commander for the southwest. It entrusted general command of the suppression armies to imperial son-in-law Shi Jingtang and deputy command to Xia Luqi, the governor of nearby Suizhou. Mingzong also insisted on securing Changan, the gateway to the southwest, by naming Wang Sitong as prefect of the western capital. Authorities in the city had intercepted and plundered convoys returning north during the previous Shu campaign, so an outside presence at Changan seemed imperative to guaranteeing safe passage for Later Tang armies for the duration of their campaign.

The suppression armies had barely penetrated the passes of northern Shu in the drive against Dong Zhang when news of the defection of Meng Zhixiang reached the capital in the eleventh month of 930. The two governors were now in league against the government. Zhixiang had turned paranoid, giving credence to rumors that Luoyang had designs on his own region in retribution for years of unruly conduct, apprehensions aggravated by Zhao Jiliang, his deputy governor and personal friend. The government retaliated by stripping Zhixiang of rank and office, but by then most members of his family had already reached Sichuan. Worse yet, Zhixiang's unexpected betrayal would compel the administration to revisit its overall strategy, as a united Shu meant a longer conflict over a wider region.

Mounting problems with the Shu campaign prompted An Chonghui to tender his resignation as military commissioner on numerous occasions during the late summer and early autumn of 930. Mingzong was equally insistent in declining: "No rift exists between me and you and the rumormongers who tried to insinuate otherwise have already been dispatched!" The resignations of courtiers in traditional China were often little more than histrionics, which appears untrue for Chonghui at this point in time. His words convey a sense of inevitability about the next cabal: "I was maligned with charges of sedition and would surely have died, if not for Your Majesty's ingenious intuition. As a man of modest talents and weighty responsibilities, the rumors can never be fully eradicated. I would much prefer to live out my days as a regional

62. JWDS 41.568–70; ZZTJ 277.9044–47, 9050–51.

governor." Chonghui's persistence left Mingzong visibly irritated; he exclaimed with an air of resignation, "If you leave, I will have no shortage of replacements!"⁶³ The emperor's retort suggests that he had already begun to consider potential successors to Chonghui, although he was greatly deluded to think that he had an appealing pool of substitutes.

The other senior military advisor, Fan Yanguang, the man first considered as a possible successor to An Chonghui, also supported his retention, noting his own limited experience in the capital. The outspoken Chief Councilor Zhao Feng concurred, having inveighed against needless shakeups in the senior leadership, or in his words, "replacing eminent statesmen for frivolous reasons." His colleague Feng Dao appears unique among courtiers in having predicted the interests of Chonghui as better served by an early resignation, stating, "Those who genuinely care for Chonghui should support his departure."⁶⁴ In effect, the ever-prescient Feng Dao had already surmised that the days of the military commissioner were numbered, and more importantly, his exit from the political arena would likely come at some risk to his person.

Part of the problem for Later Tang policymakers with reference to the intervention in Sichuan was the arrogance of their own field commanders. General-in-chief Li Renju, during the defense of Langzhou, had gravely underestimated the might and willpower of the adversary: "Shu warriors are timid and weak. How can they possibly succeed against the cream of our armed forces?"⁶⁵ The speed of the Shu conquest five years earlier had blinded men like Renju to one important difference in his own day: Shu armies were not only commanded by northern transplants like Meng Zhixiang and Dong Zhang, but manned by sizable numbers of northerners as well, tens of thousands brought to the region by Guo Chongtao in late 925 who remained after the campaign ended. Another wave of northern soldiers had accompanied Zhixiang to the south during the second intervention in early 926, men fiercely loyal to him. The armies of the Former Shu, in contrast, had been composed in large measure of Sichuan locals. Later Tang armies thus performed poorly in the field, suffering a humiliating defeat upon leaving Langzhou toward the end of 930, even before fully engaging the enemy. Renju and his family were slain by Shu insurgents, who claimed the city in short order: defending commanders at Langzhou who preferred reinforcing the city's defenses until reinforcements could arrive had been overruled by their senior command led by Renju. The governor of Eastern Chuan profited from their senseless urgency.

Despite the poor judgment of certain commanders in the field, there are numerous examples of loyal devotion on the part of local defenders. Perhaps the most prominent case involved Yao Hong, a former lieutenant of Dong Zhang, who defended Langzhou for the court and then died a cruel death in retribution: "His body [was] sliced to

63. ZZTJ 277.9045–46.

64. CFYG 78.847.

65. ZZTJ 277.9046.

bits by a team of ten stout warriors, after which Zhang cannibalized his remains.”⁶⁶ His actions sent a chilling message to other would-be resisters. In the past, Later Tang armies defending the borderlands to the north were fighting on familiar terrain. Sichuan was remote and unfamiliar, its mountainous landscape difficult for northern armies to navigate, while the approach of winter threatened to stall their advance. The impediments to success were enormous, but wholly predictable for any astute strategist.

In the tenth month of 930, Shu rebels turned their attention to Suizhou, defended by Xia Luqi, but on the heels of Langzhou’s capitulation, local soldiers began defecting en masse.⁶⁷ Soon, the armies of Dong Zhang in Eastern Chuan had overrun another five prefectures in Shu. Government forces did not reach the strategic passes of Shu until the middle of the eleventh month, where they reclaimed Jianmen and liquidated several thousand locals, then proceeded to acquire the nearby prefecture of Jianzhou. The penetration of northern armies caused Dong Zhang to turn to Meng Zhixiang for relief. In reality, his anxieties were unjustified, as the winter cold was beginning to have a hampering effect on the advance of regiments from the north. An offensive against Longzhou also ended disastrously for the court. At nearby Jianzhou, Shi Jingtang fell into an ambush, a serious loss of face for the decorated commander. The city was recovered later in the month, but by local forces, not professionals from the capital. The reversals in the field were compounded by the devastating economic impact of the campaign upon towns and cities along the way, where commodity prices soared.

After coming to terms with the magnitude of recent setbacks in Sichuan, Mingzong volunteered to assume personal command, as he had done several years earlier at Kaifeng, but civilian officials predictably resisted.⁶⁸ They were well aware that this mission might take as much as a year, while the emperor was already sixty-four. In the end, An Chonghui volunteered, which by his own admission was necessary due to his mismanagement of Shu policy in the past. He said, “This was my mistake, so I insist on assuming direction,” his words kindly deflecting responsibility away from the throne.⁶⁹ Chonghui departed the capital late in the twelfth month of 930, at a time when the narrow passes of the Qinling Mountains were doubly dangerous due to the frigid winter temperatures. Ironically, Shi Jingtang had never supported the campaign against Shu, which he surmised from the outset as fraught with peril. Chonghui would face unparalleled pressures to stop the intervention’s downward spiral, while salvaging not only his credibility in the capital, but his good name in history. For the first time in Mingzong’s reign, the overseer of military policy was now the chief enforcer in the field, in a manner startlingly similar to Guo Chongtao five years earlier. The previous Shu campaign had begun as the second stage of a grand unification of the Middle

66. ZZTJ 277.9046.

67. ZZTJ 277.9047–48, 9049–50, 9053–54.

68. JWDS 41.570, 572.

69. ZZTJ 277.9054; JWDS 41.570.

Kingdom, with Shatuo armies confident and even cocky. But the intervention in 930 began as a defensive reaction to autonomous forces at home, and northern armies were uncertain about the final outcome.

Toward the end of the first month of 931, as An Chonghui headed for Shu, he passed through Fengxiang, a prefecture west of Changan. The local governor, Zhu Hongzhao, arranged accommodations and banqueted him like a long-lost friend, with Chonghui bringing his wife, Woman Zhang, and multiple sons to the event. The frenetic pace of the suppression armies from Luoyang had littered the roadside with dead bodies, leaving the physically exhausted Chonghui more unguarded than usual. After dinner and many drinks, Chonghui turned tearful as he recounted the tribulations of the past several months, in particular allegations of treachery against him by Bian Yanwen: "Of recent, I barely survived a cabal of slander, my family and I spared solely by the ingenious scrutiny of our sovereign." The comment was intended as a compliment for Mingzong, who wisely distinguished fact from fiction and disposed of Yanwen.

An Chonghui had scarcely taken to the road when Zhu Hongzhao conveyed to the palace a radically different representation of the conversation, where he questioned the suitability of Chonghui for the mission. The letter even impugned the commissioner's loyalty to the throne: "A man of thwarted ambitions, Chonghui should not direct armies at-large for fear of undermining the authority of Shi Jingtang [as general commander]." Hongzhao would convey a second communication to Jingtang, suggesting that Chonghui's presence in the theater was certain to dispirit government armies due to his well-known proclivity for bullying subordinates.⁷⁰ Jingtang, in turn, conveyed a similarly negative message to Luoyang, but added a desperate twist: "If Chonghui reaches his final destination [of Chengdu], we may well face insurrection. He should be summoned north with dispatch." Those active in the political campaign against the military commissioner soon expanded to include the palace services commissioner, Meng Hanqiong, a close ally of palace consorts, who now dared to cast sweeping indictments of Chonghui's official record.

Faced with a consensus of three trusted commanders in the field and a cohesive inner palace, Mingzong reacted decisively by recalling his military commissioner on the thirteenth day of the second month (931.02.13), long before he reached the Shu heartland. Chonghui subsequently received demotion to governor of Hezhong, a city situated halfway between Luoyang and Changan. Chonghui passed through Fengxiang on the return leg of his journey and attempted to contact the governor and access local supplies, but Zhu Hongzhao denied the entourage access to the city. Conditions now required that Chonghui accelerate his advance, reaching Hezhong within weeks. He died there some months later at the hands of Imperial Guardsman Li Congzhang, who

70. ZZTJ 277.9055; XWDS 24.255–56, 27.289–90.

acted on instructions from the emperor “to liquidate Chonghui, if he acts in any way untoward.”

In subsequent months, Mingzong would heartlessly heap blame upon his military commissioner for a laundry list of policy failures, including the recent defection of the Sichuan governors and diplomatic setbacks with the autonomous states of Wu and Wuyue. Chonghui’s wife, née Zhang, also perished, along with several sons who had formerly served in the Palace Guard: they had rushed to Hezhong to console their father without waiting for government approval. The only act of clemency involved withholding extended punishment for distant kinsmen, as generally occurred in major political purges, to avoid resonances with the bloody final months of Zhuangzong’s reign.⁷¹ Coinciding with the purge of Chonghui was the execution of the eunuch An Xilun, whom the government accused of “clandestinely assisting Chonghui to monitor activities within the imperial compound,” in effect, serving as spy for the former military commissioner.⁷² Perhaps the monarch simply sought to place on public display his determination to uproot the remnants of Chonghui partisans across the capital, but more skeptical observers likely saw the eunuch’s purge as paranoid overreaction.

The presence of An Chonghui on the Military Commission would probably have made little difference, positive or negative, to the subsequent unfolding of the Shu campaign, for government armies suffered principally from a shortage of provisions caused by several unforeseen contingencies, including the loss of the strategic prefectures of Suizhou and Langzhou.⁷³ Later Tang armies had been engaged in Shu since the twelfth month of 930, but their losses proved especially heavy in the early months of 931. The death of the decorated warrior Xia Luqi proved especially demoralizing for Jingtang. Meanwhile, the abrupt recall of Chonghui must have introduced fissures in the senior military leadership. Later Tang armies also faced a succession of debacles in the field, including the loss of Lizhou, after its governor absconded, followed by Zhongzhou and Wanzhou.

The Shu intervention seemed on the verge of backfiring due to excessive caution in strategizing. The contrast with the audacious schemes of Mingzong’s early career in the trenches is rather startling. Perhaps for this particular mission, the emperor had deferred to the judgment of his Military Commission, due to his own unfamiliarity with conditions in South China. The timorousness of government forces simply confounded the Shu governor Meng Zhixiang. He later reflected, “If Later Tang armies had stormed Eastern Chuan to break our blockade of Suizhou, Western Chuan would have been strategically isolated, which would in turn have shaken the strategic foundations of our two circuits.”⁷⁴ Commanders in the field had slighted the importance of

71. ZZTJ 277.9060; JWDS 42.579.

72. XWDS 24.256.

73. ZZTJ 277.9055.

74. XWDS 64.801; ZZTJ 277.9051–52.

Suizhou to the wider campaign, which reflects, in the end, deficiencies in prioritizing targets and adjusting to changing conditions in the field. Perhaps prolonged domestic peace was starting to take its toll on the preparedness of Shatuo armies, whose image of invincibility had been shattered, not by foreign enemies, but by a domestic foe.

Sensing a potential stalemate in Shu, Mingzong began pursuing a negotiated settlement by the fifth month of 931. He commissioned two minor military figures as envoys to Eastern Chuan, Su Yuan and Liu Cheng, men native to the area, while blaming the intervention entirely on the former military commissioner and citing his dismissal as a symbolic conclusion to those policies.⁷⁵ A month earlier, Mingzong had honored a martyr of the Shu campaign at Suizhou, Xia Luqi, by suspending court for a day, trying to put a positive spin on developments increasingly beyond his control.⁷⁶ At the same time, he issued a pardon for the Kuizhou governor, An Chongruan, who had fled the city at the peak of the crisis.⁷⁷ To his credit, Chongruan had appeared in the capital “to confess his crimes” and explain the factors informing his decision to relinquish the city. The emperor was sufficiently assuaged to waive the mandatory death sentence and appointed Chongruan as the governor of Jinzhou. The palace seemed insensitive to the conflicting symbolism of honoring a martyr in one month and pardoning a coward the next.

The emergence of a single strongman in Shu would work against government interests in the long-term. Indeed, its own Military Commission had rendered the following highly prescient assessment long before: “If a single brigand gains control of the two circuits of Chuan, the region will become impossible to chasten.”⁷⁸ Meng Zhixiang’s first order of business involved the installation of his own intimates as overseers of Eastern Chuan, including Zhao Jiliang, Li Renhan, and Zhao Tingyin, a slate of nominees approved by the court with no resistance. At the same time, Mingzong prepared for the possibility of war by alerting commander Wang Sitong to strengthen the government’s presence in the region by drawing upon armies from as far as Xingyuan. However, this force was too small to prevail decisively in open war with the southwest.⁷⁹ In effect, Mingzong began by setting sights too low. He also crafted a letter to Zhixiang, invoking his historic bonds with Shatuo rulers: “We beseech you to protect the esteemed reputation of your clansmen by preserving the grand propriety between us as ruler and subject.”⁸⁰ The monarch effectively used the good name of his ancestors to embarrass the governor, which doubled as a reminder that the ancestral graves of the Meng clan remained vulnerable to desecration for any untoward behavior. In private conversation with others, Mingzong reiterated his belief in Zhixiang’s basic loyalty to the ruling

75. ZZTJ 277.9060–61.

76. JWDS 42.577.

77. JWDS 42.579, 90.1186.

78. JWDS 43.592; ZZTJ 277.9072.

79. JWDS 43.592; ZZTJ 277.9072.

80. ZZTJ 277.9073.

house.⁸¹ The emotionally evocative letter of Mingzong seems almost desperate, as if the Son of Heaven had devolved into a mere supplicant. Unfortunately, appearances were the least of the palace's concerns.

The Shu region seemed to be slipping away due to the appeasement policies of the palace. Military Commissioner Fan Yanguang, on the heels of Meng Zhixiang's unification of Shu, had called for a modest recalibration of court policy toward the region: "Zhixiang may have eliminated Zhang, but he will surely want to manipulate our sovereign court to strengthen his stranglehold over the two circuits of Sichuan. We should avoid acting solicitously to secure his conversion to us." In effect, Yanguang sought to position his government in a more neutral place relative to the suspicions of the former commissioner and the naïveté of the monarch. Mingzong was far from swayed. "It was initially the manipulations of others that spawned the current hazards and suspicions," he responded, alluding to the policies of An Chonghui. "How can assuaging an old friend be characterized as 'humbling ourselves'?"⁸² He thus dispatched Li Cungui to convey a personal letter to the governor: Cungui was the son of Li Kening, Keyong's younger brother, making Zhixiang and Cungui cousins, while the wife of Kening was Zhixiang's sister. Through the envoy, Mingzong reiterated his appeal for cooperation with the commander.⁸³ In another symbolic act of goodwill, the government returned to Shu another son of Zhixiang, Meng Gui, the last known relative still residing in the capital.

According to one source, Meng Zhixiang had rejected the advice of some aides to elevate himself as King of Shu as a direct consequence of overtures from Mingzong in the past year.⁸⁴ By the seventh month of 932, he chose to "confess his crimes" and affirm fealty to the government in Luoyang, effectively ending his insurrection.⁸⁵ The court received his communiqué in the ninth month of 932, conveyed by the diplomat Li Cungui, which apprised it of recent developments in the Shu region, a narrative undoubtedly slanted to render the governor in a favorable light.⁸⁶ Zhixiang also forwarded a sizable tribute to the capital. But the same correspondence contained a request that once again caused courtiers to question his loyalties, after he nominated Zhao Jiliang and four other cronies for governorships in the region.⁸⁷ He further informed Luoyang after the fact of a new slate of incoming prefects for Shu and requested the authority in the future to appoint officials across the region without its consent. The authority to appoint governors had been deemed problematic even for client-states like Wuyue, and Shu was an integral part of the Later Tang empire.

81. JWDS 43.592.

82. XWDS 64.802; JWDS 43.592; ZZTJ 277.9073.

83. JWDS 43.592; ZZTJ 277.9073.

84. ZZTJ 277.9072.

85. ZZTJ 278.9075.

86. JWDS 43.593.

87. JWDS 43.594; ZZTJ 278.9075–77.

In addition, Meng Zhixiang petitioned to assume direct control over a force of thirty thousand soldiers from the north, residuals from the at-large armies of Xia Luqi and Li Renju. Despite the highly presumptuous character of both requests, the administration conceded. The Shu governor followed through with an even more insolent petition calling for the release of the military dependents of Xia Luqi and Li Renju, whose armies had already been allowed to remain in Sichuan. This was the only request rejected outright by the palace. The government commonly released individual dependents or small groups of dependents, but never entire blocks. Zhixiang had proven deft in employing conciliatory language in communications with Luoyang, but with the intent of whittling away at its clout in the region. In a special gesture to the southwest, the court dispatched the senior diplomat Liu Zheng'en, head of the Palace Postern, for a second mission to Shu. It also deployed as envoy to Sichuan the conciliatory Li Cungui. The primary task for government agents now shifted to maintaining cordial relations with Zhixiang at all costs.

Over the course of 932, Mingzong conferred a jade belt upon Meng Zhixiang, while conveying to Chengdu some three thousand bolts of silk for placement in the coffin of the governor's recently deceased wife. But Zhixiang pushed the limits of imperial forbearance still further by petitioning to appoint on his own authority the entire cohort of civil and military officials in the region, not just governors and prefects. The throne consented to this outrageous demand as well, only for Zhixiang to press for the repatriation of dependents of all Shu military officers currently held hostage in the capital. Finally, Mingzong rendered a firm refusal.⁸⁸ A year later, the court bestowed upon Zhixiang the title of "Prince of Shu." The palace also presented to the Sichuan governor a robe for courtiers of the first rank, garb delivered personally by officials from the capital.⁸⁹ As the reign came to a close, the court had turned craven, the emperor lacking in will and his senior military aides lacking in vision. Fortunately, Mingzong did not live long enough to witness the final breach between Luoyang and Chengdu, which occurred mere months after his death.

88. JWDS 43.594.

89. JWDS 44.602; ZZTJ 278.9082, 9086.

Epilogue

The Aborted Rule of Li Conghou (r. 933–934)

The sudden demise of his presumptive heir surely worsened the last days of Mingzong and accelerated his death. Frequently in the past, when confronting contested allegations of political crimes, the monarch had insisted on interrogating the parties involved to reach a fair conclusion, reflecting his hands-on approach to administering justice. But sadly, Congrong's death in his Luoyang headquarters denied the father that final confrontation with the youth to pinpoint who and what may have swayed him to mobilize armies against his own father. The thoughts of the dying monarch, as a man of little faith but much superstition, must have also pondered the possibility of retribution from the netherworld caused by his own mutiny over seven years earlier, a mutiny that left his adopted brother dead and his entire line of descent extinguished. In traditional China, the spirits could be pernicious about exacting reprisals. For societies without a concept of Judgment Day, death is merely a natural progression to another state of existence, consignment to the subterranean underworld in the case of Confucianism or the next incarnation for Buddhism. Mingzong could have perished with proud thoughts about his place in history, if not for the deeds of an ungrateful son.

Mingzong's successor, Li Conghou, who succeeded him in the twelfth month of 933, went by the nickname Pusanu, an appellation whose Buddhist resonances suggest early faith in the religion. As a teenager, the future Emperor Min came to be held in such high regard by his father that officials sensed a favor for him that rivaled that for Congrong in the last years of Mingzong's life. Tragically, each son was appealing in his own way. Younger son Conghou possessed an easy familiarity with China's classical philosophy, interests better suited to his father's preferences. He also studied history with a passion and as ruler encouraged his subjects to read works pertaining to Tang Taizong, whose illustrious rule he aspired to replicate like his father before him.¹ Starting from the age of sixteen *sui*, Conghou received assignments to strategic governorships away from the capital, changing posts almost annually for the next five

1. XWDS 7.69.

years. In the process, the younger son acquired familiarity with conditions away from the capital. Court observers had every reason to think that Conghou's accession to the throne at the close of 933, at twenty *sui*, well beyond his majority, augured well for the regime, even though his predecessors were considerably older—Zhuangzong was nearly forty and Mingzong shy of sixty.

During the short interval between the death of Mingzong and the arrival of Conghou from Weizhou, court overseers imposed restrictions on public mourning. Conghou first presided over mourning rites on the first day of the twelfth month (933.12.01) at the monarch's bier in the Western Palace, the same site where his father had launched public mourning for Zhuangzong seven and a half years earlier. The new emperor then greeted officials on the eastern steps of the palace, after which he donned mourning garments for the next twenty-five days. The political protocol and social customs of the Middle Kingdom had been followed to the letter. Conghou represents the first son to succeed his father since the Later Tang began, which buttressed his sense of legitimacy. In the middle of the twelfth month, Emperor Min announced the list of dignitaries to preside over the upcoming state funeral, a list headed predictably by Feng Dao.² He presided uneventfully over formal audience at the Guangshou Palace, the venue freshly refurbished by his father, on the first day of the lunar New Year (934.01.01), mere steps away from the imperial coffin. Emperor Min also confirmed as military commissioner one of the closest comrades of Mingzong toward the end of his life, Zhu Hongzhao, to convey a sense of continuity in terms of military personnel. Another intimate of his predecessor, Shi Jingtang, received honors as Secretariat Director, an act of outreach to the Shatuo military elite.

The energies of Emperor Min in his early months were also deflected by burial preparations for his father, which included an inspection of the site in the suburbs of Luoyang to assess progress and propose last minute modifications. He also prodded Military Commissioners Jingtang and Hongzhao to contribute to construction costs out of their private wealth to reduce the burden on the government. The request provides evidence of the limited reserves in the imperial treasury due to excessive largesse for the armed forces in the last year of Mingzong's life, as noted earlier. But in the second month of 934, before the deceased monarch could be properly laid to rest, his son faced an insurrection from a brother by adoption, who managed to rally the hearts of the country's political and military leaders to his cause, ultimately pitting the mighty Palace Guard against influential regional governors. Conghou's challenger was the most intimate of palace insiders, but related neither by blood nor race to his father.

Mingzong was in battle at Zhenzhou when he came upon the mother of Li Congke, Woman Wei, who died at Jinyang some years later. The son of Woman Wei, known initially by the nickname of Asan, changed his name to Congke at sometime after nine *sui*, upon formal adoption by the future Mingzong. As he matured into a man, Congke

2. ZZTJ 278.9096–9102; JWDS 45.613–14; XWDS 7.69–70, 15.158–59.

had won over the older man's heart, "due to a daring and imposing demeanor, scrupulous integrity and cautious tongue, plus dauntless valor and combat prowess."³ In other words, he reminded the emperor of himself. Eighteen years younger than Mingzong and nearly thirty years older than his successor, Emperor Min, the adopted son possessed a wealth of military experience, extending backward to the long conflagration against the Liang dynasty and forward to the mutiny at Weizhou that catapulted Mingzong to power, each time playing a decisive role in securing a positive outcome. Congke's subsequent mishandling of an insurgency at Hezhong prompted Military Commissioner An Chonghui to press for capital punishment, cynically exploiting the incident to eliminate someone long regarded by him as a future threat to the monarchy, not unlike the emperor some years earlier relative to Zhuangzong. Mingzong placed Congke under house arrest instead, then resuscitated him in the aftermath of Chonghui's purge. Despite the demise of his chief detractor in the administration, Congke seems to have carried a grudge against senior courtiers, especially the Military Commission. He thus cited illness in declining to come to the capital to mourn Mingzong in late 933, in the fashion expected of all sons, including the brood of adopted young men. In fact, Congke considered his very life to be in jeopardy, sources say, due to the new lineup of military commissioners, Zhu Hongzhao and Feng Yun, men elevated by Mingzong in his dying days ostensibly to secure the inheritance of his own flesh and blood.

At the time of Mingzong's death, Congke held the governorship of Fengxiang, a prefecture located near the strategic passes to Shu, while his son, the twenty-something Li Chongji, directed the Crane-Commanding Guard in the capital. Soon after the accession, Emperor Min stripped Chongji of his Palace Guard post and demoted him to a lesser position in the provinces. He acted reputedly on the counsel of the Military Commission, which sought to consolidate the young administration's control over the security apparatus in the capital. The Military Commission had also issued secret orders to reassign Shi Jingtang and Fan Yanguang, disquieting other powerful commanders in the process. Congke soon learned of imperial plans to relocate him to Taiyuan, effectively isolating him from the county's political heartland in the central plains. Even a sister at a nunnery near Luoyang had proven vulnerable, after receiving a summons to the capital.

Sometime earlier, Emperor Min had ordered the death of Wardrobe Stewardess Wang, who happened to be the wet nurse of Li Congyi, a boy born to another concubine of Mingzong but raised by the Pure Consort Wang. The wet nurse had an affair with Congrong, the now discredited son of Mingzong, having exploited her job as Congyi's caretaker to visit the palace of Congrong to consummate their affair. Congrong in turn deployed her to spy on his father's palace, which effectively implicated her after his conspiracy had been exposed. The former emperor's adopted son, Congke, had no

3. XWDS 7.71.

demonstrable involvement in the subterfuge of Congrong and Wardrobe Stewardess Wang, but the death of a woman associated with his brother by adoption, the purge of his own son from the Palace Guard, and the summons of his sister to the capital—these factors taken together gave Congke cause to suspect a plot against him at the highest level. To further complicate matters, these various events coincided with the governor of Shu, Meng Zhixiang, declaring independence in the first month of 934, less than two months after Mingzong's death, to become Emperor of Shu.⁴ Based at Fengxiang, directly north of Shu, Congke found himself trapped between two equally unsavory forces, a newly enthroned emperor to his south and a hostile government to the east. He reasoned that the government under a young and untested leader was an easier target.

The adopted son rebelled outright in the middle of the second month of 934 by rejecting orders to relocate to Jinyang. As news of the insurrection reached the capital, Emperor Min ordered the execution of Congke's eldest son, Chongji, then under house arrest at Songzhou. The young man had provided personal security for Mingzong during his dying days, the monarch heaping praise on him and his father for their steadfast devotion. Their loyalties were less valued by the young emperor. The administration in Luoyang unleashed a suppression force overseen by two seasoned commanders, Wang Sitong and Yao Yanchou, after the self-serving Kang Yicheng declined the assignment. But reports from the front went from disappointing to dire. Government forces had managed to reach Fengxiang to launch a highly effective siege, but soon faced a string of worrisome defections within their own ranks. From a position along the outer wall of Fengxiang, Congke had managed to rally men and eventually turn the tide in his favor, causing Wang Sitong and Yao Yanchou to abandon their campaign and flee northward with a small residual force.

In the weeks to come, the armies of the rebellious prince would make steady progress toward the capital. Military leaders at the strategic western capital, Changan, surrendered without a fight. In desperation, the palace summoned the commissioner of palace armies, Meng Hanqiong, but the eunuch failed to respond, placing self-preservation before professional duty. Military aides on intimate terms with Emperor Min, such as Murong Qian, similarly refused to lend assistance. Even Shi Jingtang decided to desert the twenty-year-old monarch in the face of overwhelming odds. He had intentionally kept a low profile during the reign of Emperor Min, sources say, in anticipation of disaffection within the military, which had grown disillusioned with the caprice of Zhu Hongzhao and Feng Yun. The two military commissioners would perish in the course of the mutiny, followed by Kang Yicheng and Yao Yanchou, commanders who had shirked their ethical responsibilities. Other commanders succumbed to the lure of

4. ZZTJ 279.9103–17; XWDS 64.802; Zhang Qifan, *Wudai jinjun*, pp. 87–89; Dudbridge, *A Portrait of the Five Dynasties*, pp. 22–35.

bribes.⁵ Faced with the scandalous disservice of his father's senior aides, Emperor Min fled the capital, dying days later at the hands of armies loyal to Jingtang, Mingzong's son-in-law. Congke entered Luoyang to assume the throne early in the fourth month of 934, following the blueprint of his adopted father nearly eight years earlier. The older man possessed a wealth of experience and decades of contacts upon which to draw, something that the twenty-year old emperor would have found hard to overcome even under the best of circumstances, and circumstances in his case were less than ideal.

Trials of the Surrogate Son: Li Congke (r. 934–936)

Although elevated by the military, Li Congke found the civil service leadership equally eager to embrace him. Feng Dao rallied quickly behind his enthronement, which occurred on the seventh day of the fourth month (934.04.07), three days before Emperor Min expired in flight. A man of fifty *sui* at the time of accession, he became known to history variously as Emperor Fei or Emperor Mo. There was no wait to certify the demise of Emperor Min, no call to consider alternatives to Congke, nor any debate about changing the dynastic designation for this Chinese pretender to the Shatuo throne, as occurred during Siyuan's nearly month-long tenure as interim regent. Congke retained the title of interim regent for merely three days. In reality, the adopted son had a biological link to neither Zhuangzong nor Mingzong, but founding a new dynasty as tradition dictated would have drawn attention to the illicit nature of his reign. To the extent that the matter had been addressed eight years earlier, when Mingzong invoked his standing as adopted son and cited his record of distinguished service to justify inheriting the imperium, there was no pressing need to litigate the issue anew.

The reign of Emperor Fei lasted roughly two years, much longer than observers might have expected. But he came to power and stayed in power for lack of compelling alternatives: the only known surviving son of Mingzong and his numerous grandsons were too young to offer any meaningful challenge. Still, Emperor Fei would eventually face a combination of challengers at home and abroad that proved fatal in the end. He began in a bad way by draining already perilously low government coffers to reward troops, the replenishment of which cost much in the way of goodwill within a wider public. Emperor Fei also conducted a major political shakeup at court, reassigning the savvy and highly regarded Chief Councilor Feng Dao to a regional post, a man too closely associated with the administration of his adopted father, while Fan Yanguang returned to the capital as military commissioner, the same man who abandoned Mingzong scarcely a month before his death for fear of strife within the imperial family. None of the men in leadership positions under Emperor Fei had the long-term vision and dedication of An Chonghui and Ren Huan, his father's earliest brain trust.

5. Wang Gungwu, *The Structure of Power in North China*, pp. 160–61.

But the preeminent concern of Emperor Fei was the existential threat posed by Shi Jingtang, a man held in high regard within the military elite due to a multiplicity of associations with Mingzong.⁶

In youth, Shi Jingtang and Congke had been competitors on the polo field, a healthy rivalry that extended to the battlefield in later years. The two men had grown up together in Jinyang and likely moved in similar circles for most of their lives, as Jingtang was seven years younger than Congke. And during the adopted son's struggle to succeed Mingzong, Jingtang had rendered timely assistance in forcing Emperor Min from power, thereby eluding the death sentence that awaited equivocal sorts like Kang Yicheng. Emperor Fei initially decided in 934 to avoid tensions by retaining Jingtang as governor of Jinyang. But the city was too politically symbolic and strategically situated to permit the most charismatic military leader of his day to preside there in hereditary fashion.

By 935, frictions between Luoyang and Jinyang intensified due to mutual suspicions with long histories, matters worsened by a flood of rumors impugning the loyalties of Shi Jingtang. The powerful governor proved more savvy, exploiting his panoply of contacts in the palace to plant spies whose reports only reinforced his insecurities about the intentions of Emperor Fei. Suspicions were also piqued by Jingtang's attempt to repatriate his wife, currently in Luoyang, to the safety of Jinyang, in the manner of the Shu governor Meng Zhixiang in the last years of Mingzong's reign. Jingtang had already managed to remove sizable sums of wealth to his Hedong base.⁷ Despite frictions with the capital, the hands of Emperor Fei were tied in the wake of a Kitan incursion against the northern border in late 934, conditions that necessitated the retention of Jingtang in the region. The court's dependency on Jingtang to contain the northern menace has resonances of nine years earlier, when Zhuangzong grudgingly deployed Mingzong to the border for lack of credible alternatives, a history familiar to all parties. At the same time, Emperor Fei dispatched the trusted lieutenant Zhang Jingda to Daizhou, northern Hedong, in the seventh month of 935 to subject Jingtang to quiet surveillance, a reflection of the new depths of their mutual mistrust.

In the fifth month of 936, the court announced Shi Jingtang's redeployment to Yunzhou, a prefecture located south of the Yellow River in modern Shandong, an order received by Jingtang with feigned astonishment: "The Former Monarch long ago entrusted to me the Taiyuan command, so reassignment today without cause can only infer suspicion of my inclination to treachery."⁸ Jingtang's intractability had been incited by two celebrated figures of his day, military aide Liu Zhiyuan and civilian advisor Sang Weihuan, men who considered the rift between the administration

6. ZZTJ 280.9138–66; JWDS 46.625–40, 47.643–54, 48.657–668, 75.977–89; XWDS 7.71–75; Zhang Qifan, *Wudai jinjun*, p. 89; Dudbridge, *A Portrait of Five Dynasties China*, pp. 22–24, 63–64.

7. ZZTJ 280.9138–39.

8. XWDS 8.79.

in Luoyang and the governor at Jinyang to have long passed the point of reconciliation.⁹ The governor thus issued a defiant letter that denounced Emperor Fei as an imposter and demanded the enthronement of Congyi, the adopted son of the Pure Consort Wang. Emperor Fei then summarily divested Jingtang of all offices and dispatched a suppression force to Hedong led by two of the most decorated commanders on his roster, Zhang Jingda and Yang Guangyuan, while dispatching Fan Yanguang to another hotspot, Weizhou. But Emperor Fei must have realized that the odds were against him, due to Jingtang's superior professional and social networks within the dynasty's military elite, and especially Shatuo concentrations in Hedong. Jingtang also had at his disposal the considerable strategic assets of the northern capital, a plentitude of natural obstacles and human enhancements, conditions that historically served to thwart intervention from the outside.

The government's siege of Jinyang proved understandably protracted, prompting Shi Jingtang to turn to the country's premier rival to the north for relief, the Kitan ruler Yelü Deguang. The meeting of the two men at Jinyang ended in the pair swearing oaths of allegiance, the older Jingtang accepting the protocol of "son" or "subject" (*chen*) in relations with Deguang. The power relationship between the Kitan and the Shatuo had been inverted overnight, the Shatuo now vassals of the Kitan. By the end of their tête-à-tête, Deguang was so thoroughly impressed by Jingtang's personal traits that he exclaimed, "It is regrettable that our paths did not cross sooner!"¹⁰ The Kitan subsequently deployed a force of fifty thousand in relief, a much larger contingent than the Dingzhou intervention in 928. At the same time, Deguang prodded Jingtang to consider formal accession as emperor.¹¹ The extension of Kitan support for the Hedong potentate relates partly to their aggravation with Emperor Fei, who had refused to release their prized commander Zela, a hostage of the Later Tang government for some seven to eight years.¹² Deguang may have also learned of Luoyang's plan to install Li Zanhua, the former Kitan prince, as ruler of a puppet regime in opposition to his own brother, Deguang. In reality, Emperor Fei had wisely tabled the far-fetched proposal, a decision unbeknownst to them.¹³

Conditions for the Later Tang deteriorated fast in the aftermath of the Kitan intervention on Jingtang's behalf, which triggered massive defections in the military commands at Luoyang, including Deputy Commander Yang Guangyuan. Moreover, as had occurred two years earlier under Emperor Min, military governors across the country ignored the current emperor's summons to take action against Jingtang, a Shatuo ethnic who seemed a more plausible successor to the revered Mingzong. By the eleventh month of 936, a half-year into their showdown, Jingtang prevailed to

9. ZZTJ 280.9142–46.

10. ZZTJ 280.9149.

11. ZZTJ 280.9146–49.

12. ZZTJ 280.9139.

13. ZZTJ 280.9151–52.

become the founding emperor of the Jin dynasty. Emperor Fei committed suicide in the capital, making him the third of the four rulers of Later Tang to die under violent circumstances. The Kitan intervention had proven critical to restoring the Shatuo to the throne of the Middle Kingdom after the usurpation of a Han-Chinese interloper, although Deguang's original intent was likely to create a little mischief by exploiting internal rifts within China.¹⁴

As the armies of Shi Jingtang encircled the Later Tang capital at the end of 936, the surviving wife and concubines of Mingzong faced some unsavory choices. Empress Cao, whose daughter was married to the insurgent Jingtang, had been prodded by palace friends to flee to safety or seek sanctuary under the new regime, but she countered in a determined voice, "How could I countenance survival for my person when family fortunes have come to this!" She subsequently died by self-immolation at the Xuanwu Tower of Luoyang in affirmation of devotion to her husband's legacy, not far from the palace where Emperor Fei, the former Congke, committed suicide. The story stands as testimonial to the ethical backbone of the usually demure Empress Cao, whose devotion to husband and country exceeded even her love of life.

14. Zhang Qifan, *Wudai jinjun*, pp. 81–82.

Chronology of Events for the Reign of Mingzong

926 First Year of Tiancheng

- 04.01 (month/day) Zhuangzong perishes at Luoyang
- 04.03 Siyuan arrives in Luoyang
- 04.06 Siyuan installed as Interim Regent
- 04.09 An Chonghui named military commissioner
- 04.20 Siyuan accedes as Emperor Mingzong
- 04.28 Reign name changed retroactively to Tiancheng
- 05.01 Doulu Ge and Wei Yue retained as chief councilors; Kong Xun elevated to military commissioner
- 05.02 Zheng Jue and Ren Huan elevated to chief councilors; mutiny of Zhang Yanchong at Linzhou
- 05.20 Feng Dao and Zhao Feng named Duanming academicians
- 06.27 Mutiny of Zhao Qian at Kaifeng is suppressed by Kong Xun
- 06.29 Later Tang concedes to Nanping the prefectures of Kui, Zhong, and Wan
- 07.10 Mutiny of Yu Kehong at Huazhou successfully suppressed
- 07.21 Burial of Zhuangzong at Luoyang
- 07.21 Mutiny at Zhuozhou by Liu Yinzhao
- 07.27 Kitan ruler Abaoji dies
- 07.25 Dismissal of chief councilors Doulu Ge and Wei Yue
- 08.01 Solar eclipse
- 08.13 The insubordinate Wang Gongyan executed at Qizhou by Huo Yanwei
- 08.15 Kitan raid at Youzhou leads to dispatch of An Shentong
- 10.17 Defection of Kitan official Lu Wenjin to Later Tang
- 12.05 Lu Wenjin reaches Luoyang
- 12.11 Imperial son Congrong conferred powers as chief councilor
- 12.11 Eldest son Congrong named Interim Regent of Weizhou

927 Second Year of Tiancheng

- 01.01 Mingzong changes personal name to Dan
- 01.11 Feng Dao and Cui Xie elevated to chief councilors
- 01.19 Adopted son Congke receives councilor powers
- 01.21 Imperial son Conghou receives councilor powers
- 01.21 Defection of the Xi tribe Tuoluozi
- 02.09 Shi Jingtang named Deputy Commissioner of the Six Armies
- 02.11 Shu governor Meng Zhixiang murders northern envoy Li Yan
- 02.15 Court orders death of Guo Congqian for complicity in assassination of Zhuangzong
- 03.21 Lutai mutiny begins
- 03.23 Later Tang representative Li Renju arrives in Chengdu
- 04.01 Lutai mutiny suppressed by An Shentong
- 05.18 Later Tang armies withdraw from Nanping
- 06.07 Ren Huan dismissed as chief councilor and fiscal commissioner
- 06.07 Zhang Yanlang named fiscal commissioner (succeeding Ren Huan)
- 06.21 Rites to the Tujue spirits conducted at Baima Slope
- 07.15 Xifang Ye defeats armies of Nanping and recovers the three prefectures of Kui, Zhong, and Wan
- 07.23 Execution of Doule Ge and Wei Yue
- 08.01 Solar eclipse occurs
- 08.19 Kitan request to trade at Xinzhou border town
- 08.26 Imperial son Congrong marries the daughter of governor Liu Zhongyin
- 09.09 Emperor's sixty-first birthday
- 10.07 Mingzong departs Luoyang for Kaifeng
- 10.09 Mutiny of Zhu Shouyin erupts at Kaifeng, suppressed in two days
- 10.12 Former councilor Ren Huan is executed
- 10.25 Earthquake at Fengxiang
- 10.25 Shi Jingtang named governor of Kaifeng and director of Palace Guard
- 12.02 Earthquake at Xuzhou
- 12.03 Imperial son Congrong named governor of Taiyuan

928 Third Year of Tiancheng

- 01.14 The Kitan reclaim Pingzhou
- 01.27 Consort Cao elevated as the Pure Consort and Consort Wang as the Virtuous Consort
- 02.01 Emperor cancels tour of Weizhou
- 03.13 Chief Councilor Zheng Jue retires

- 03.17 Wang Jianli named chief councilor and fiscal commissioner
- 03.22 Fan Yanguang named military commissioner
- 03.22 Zhang Yanlang named Commissioner of Xuanhui Palace Southern Guard
- 04.03 Shi Jingtang named interim regent for Weizhou
- 04.09 Mingzong invests two daughters as Princess
- 04.10 Kang Yicheng named chief director of the Palace Guard
- 04.27 Mutiny of Wang Du at Dingzhou causes dispatch of suppression forces led by Wang Yanqiu and An Shentong
- 05.15 Kitan forces led by Tunei intervene at Dingzhou
- 06.16 Kitan armies are routed by Zhao Dejun at Youzhou
- 07.16 Court experiments with the private production of liquor
- 07.19 Additional relief from the Kitan arrives at Dingzhou
- 07.21 Major rout of Kitan at Dingzhou
- Intercalary 08.06 Mass execution of Kitan captives
- Intercalary 08.13 Pingzhou prefect Zhang Xichong (Kitan subject) defects to Later Tang
- Intercalary 08.27 Earthquake at Jiangzhou
- 09.09 Emperor's sixty-second birthday
- 09.23 Execution of Wen Tao and Duan Ning
- 10.07 Mutiny at Qingzhou by Dou Tingwan suppressed by Li Jingzhou
- 10.23 Mutiny in Palace Guard units at Anzhou suppressed by Gao Xinggui
- 11.18 Hou Yanwei dies; monarch suspends court for three days
- 11.25 Mingzong discusses "writs of immunity"
- 12.03 Mutiny of Dou Tingwan is suppressed

929 Fourth Year of Tiancheng

- 01.21 Feng Yun is named finance commissioner and commissioner of the Xuanhui Guard
- 02.03 Completion of Dingzhou suppression by Wang Yanqiu
- 02.21 Rebel Wang Du and Kitan mercenary Tunei executed at Kaifeng
- 02.30 Mingzong returns to Luoyang after extended stay in Kaifeng
- 03.16 Mingzong's fourth son Congcan executed for *lèse majesté*
- 04.03 Renovations to Guangshou Palace completed
- 04.13 Mingzong's eldest son named prefect of Henan
- 04.15 Zhao Feng becomes chief councilor
- 05.28 Nanping governor Gao Conghui surrenders
- 07.05 Commander Mao Zhang executed at Ruzhou for treachery
- 09.09 Emperor's sixty-third birthday
- 09.27 Wuyue governor Qian Liu stripped of honors

- 11.02 Flooding in Luoyang
- 11.19 Completion of “Veritable Records” for Zhuangzong

930 First Year of Changxing

- 02.18 Mingzong conducts the Mingtang rites
- 02.21 Announces reign name change to Changxing
- 03.12 Zhu Hongzhao named governor of Fengxiang
- 03.19 Monarch adopts new honorary title as the Sagaciously Enlightened, Spiritually Martial, Literary, Virtuous, Reverent and Filial Emperor
- 03.26 Mingzong approves elevation of Pure Consort Cao as Empress and the Virtuous Consort Wang as the Pure Consort
- 04.09 Mutiny of Yang Yanwen at Hezhong that implicates adopted son Congke; imperial reprieve follows
- 04.24 Kitan defeat at Yunzhou results in ten thousand casualties
- 05.14 Investitures for Empress Cao and Consort Wang
- 06.25 Second son Conghou reassigned as Zhenzhou governor
- 08.04 Execution of Bian Yanwen for falsely accusing An Chonghui
- 08.04 Fiscal Commission (*Sansi*) established
- 09.09 Emperor’s sixty-fourth birthday
- 09.16 Court strips Eastern Chuan governor Dong Zhang of office and rank
- 11.16 Court strips Western Chuan governor Meng Zhixiang of office and rank
- 11.25 Kitan Prince of Dongdan, Li Zanhua, defects to Later Tang
- 12.06 King of Chu, Ma Yin, dies; court suspended for three days
- 12.25 An Chonghui dispatched to Shu to suppress Meng Zhixiang and Dong Zhang

931 Second Year of Changxing

- 01.13 Prince of Dongdan arrives in Luoyang
- 02.13 An Chonghui demoted to Hezhong governor
- 03.14 Former Military Commissioner Kong Xun dies
- 03.17 Wang Sitong dispatched to Xiazhou to suppress the Tanguts
- 03.27 Honors restored to Qian Liu
- Intercalary 05.12 An Chonghui executed
- 06.26 Earthquake at Taiyuan
- 09.07 Fan Yanguang receives concurrent powers as chief councilor
- 09.09 Emperor’s sixty-fifth birthday
- 10.07 Massive earthquake at Taiyuan
- 11.01 Solar eclipse
- 12.01 Government allows commoners to produce their own iron implements

932 Third Year of Changxing

- 01.07 Kang Fu is dispatched to intervene against the Tanguts
- 01.13 Fuqing Senior Princess (wife of Meng Zhixiang) dies
- 02.22 Li Zanhua produces map of the Kitan kingdom
- 02.22 Mutiny by Xu Shenhuan is suppressed at Lingzhou
- 05.27 Flooding in Xiangzhou region
- 06.17 Dong Zhang perishes in Eastern Chuan
- 06.23 Flooding of the Luo River
- 07.01 Court suspended for three days to honor the Wuyue governor Qian Liu, who died in the third month
- 07.09 Flooding across a broad swath of central China
- 07.19 Adopted son Congke named governor of Fengxiang
- 07.27 Zhao Feng demoted to Xingzhou governor
- 09.09 Emperor's sixty-sixth birthday
- 09.26 Earthquake at Qinzhou
- 10.24 Memorial from Kang Cheng on amnesties
- 11.09 Shi Jingtang reassigned as Hedong governor
- 11.11 Military Commissioner Zhao Yanshou receives councilor powers
- 11.11 Zhang Yanchao defects to the Kitan
- 11.27 Kitan prepare offensive installations north of Yunzhou
- 12.11 Kang Yicheng named Heyang governor and director of the Palace Guard

933 Fourth Year of Changxing

- 01.13 Liu Xu named chief councilor
- 01.17 Tujue Turks surrender to Later Tang
- 02.01 Mingzong discusses horses with Fan Yanguang
- 02.11 Meng Zhixiang is restored to Later Tang office and invested King of Shu
- 03.03 Tangut leader Li Renfu dies, his son Yichao named interim regent
- 03.12 Tangut leader Li Yichao refuses reassignment
- 05.09 Mingzong stricken with apoplexy
- 05.26 Posthumous titles are restored to Tangut leader Li Renfu
- 07.08 Later Tang armies withdraw from Tangut lands
- 09.09 Emperor's sixty-seventh birthday
- 10.15 Sun Yue named finance commissioner
- 10.17 Fan Yanguang and Zhao Yanshou resign as military commissioners
- 11.20 Imperial son Congrong tries to occupy the palace and subsequently dies
- 11.26 Mingzong expires

Chronology based on "Basic Annals" of *The Old History of the Five Dynasties*, supplemented by *Zizhi tongjian* in case of discrepancies.

*Table 1: Degree Conferrals under Mingzong,
926–933*

Year	Exam	Degrees
926.08	Erudite Literatus (<i>Boxue hongci</i>)	1
	Doctoral (<i>Jinshi</i>)	8
927.12	Doctoral	23
	Miscellaneous (<i>Zhuke</i>)	9
928.12	Doctoral	15
	Miscellaneous	4
929.12	Doctoral	13
	Miscellaneous	2
930.12	Doctoral	15
	Miscellaneous	9
	Classical Expository (<i>Mingjing</i>)	4
931.07	Doctoral	4
932.12	Doctoral	8
	Miscellaneous	81

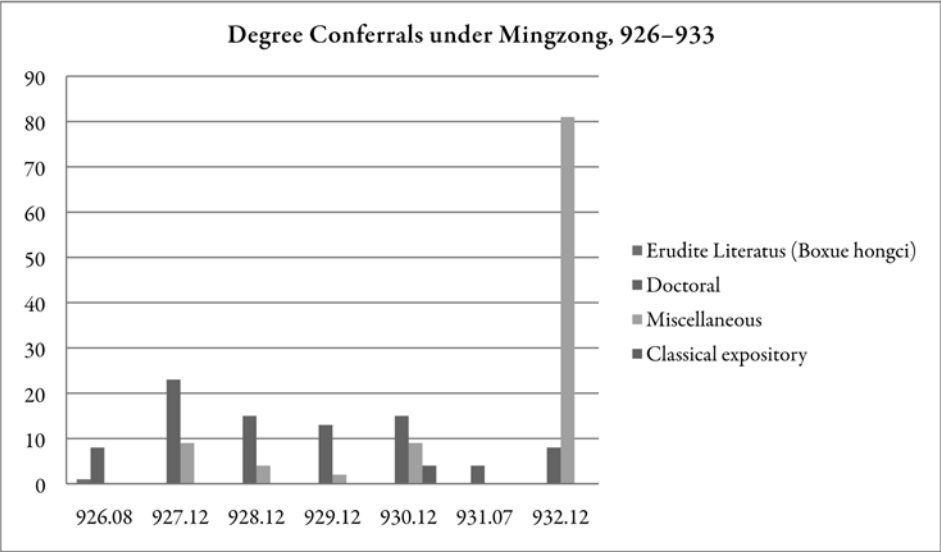
Totals:

Jinshi: 86

Zhuke: 105

Boxue: 1

Mingjing: 4



Totals:

Jinshi: 86

Zhuke: 105

Boxue: 1

Mingjing: 4

Sources Cited

Unthinkably, three official histories exist for the Five Dynasties period (907–979). The source closest in time, the *Old History of the Five Dynasties*, or *Jiu Wudai shi* 舊五代史 (JWDS), was compiled by the History Bureau at the outset of the Song dynasty, in the 970s, under the editorship of Xue Juzheng 薛居正. The popular *New History of the Five Dynasties*, or *Xin Wudai shi* 新五代史, authored individually by Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修, was published posthumously by the Song government in 1077 under the name *Historical Records of the Five Dynasties*, or *Wudai shiji* 五代史記. Due to the government's imprint, it is considered an official history as well, even though the author wrote privately with neither the sponsorship nor subvention of the government. I have published the bulk of the Chinese original in English translation. In the notes, references to “HR” allude to the English translation, while “XWDS” refers to the Chinese original. Another more detailed punctuated edition of the *Old History* was published in 2005, *Jiu Wudai shi xinji huizheng* 舊五代史新輯會證, edited by Chen Shangjun 陳尚君, which I have consulted extensively. The work is infinitely superior to the original 1976 edition, but it is not used in the footnotes for citation, due to the wider availability of the original (including digital format).

The *Historical Records* is an important supplement to the *Old History*: its author, as senior editor of another official history, the *New History of the Tang*, or *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書, enjoyed unrestricted access to a broad range of sources in the imperial and private libraries of Kaifeng, from the Veritable Records (*Shilu* 實錄) and National Histories (*Guoshi* 國史) to quasi-literary sources like “historical anecdotes” (*biji xiao-shuo* 筆記小說). The *Historical Records* also offers an entertaining and tightly-knit narrative of the times. It is an infinitely more fluent version of the *Old History*, but it remains an abridged rendering of the original with less factual detail. Both works were written in the “composite annals and biography format” (*ji zhuan ti* 紀傳體) characteristic of the dynastic history.

The third major source for the Five Dynasties period, the *Comprehensive Mirror for the Advancement of Governance*, or *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (ZZTJ), compiled by Sima Guang 司馬光 and published a decade after the Ouyang Xiu text, employs the annalistic format throughout, which makes it invaluable for establishing a chronology

of political events. The 294-chapter work covers the years 403 BCE to 959 CE, its final thirty chapters devoted to the Five Dynasties. Under the editorial direction of Sima Guang and sponsorship of the Song government, writers of the *Comprehensive Mirror* could consult the two dynastic histories as well as contemporary works no longer extant. Sima Guang worked out of Luoyang, capital of the Later Tang, which likely facilitated access to clusters of material unavailable to Ouyang Xiu at Kaifeng. Due to the range of sources consulted and the sizable staff of contributors to the project, the *Comprehensive Mirror* is seen as the most informed and objective source. Inasmuch as each work has unique strengths and weaknesses, and none truly deserves to be deemed authoritative, I have avoided undue reliance on any one text. Even in the case of citations from my published translation of the *Historical Records*, I have compared versions in the several texts when available, and often emended entries to reflect the consensus of the several texts.

The most invaluable source for the reign is *Cefu yuangui* 冊府元龜 (CFYG), 1,000 chapters in length (some 13,000 pages in punctuated form), a work compiled under the auspices of the Song court and the editorial oversight of Wang Qinruo 王欽若. As a work produced in the late tenth century, it has greater proximity to the period and contains fewer of the biases of eleventh century writings. I have decided to cite a 2006 punctuated edition published by Fenghuang Publishing House, despite numerous errors of punctuation and even missing words. For important passages, I have compared sections in the new edition against the earlier version for accuracy. Some scholars of the period refuse altogether to cite the Fenghuang edition due its numerous technical problems, which seems something of an overreaction. It remains the friendliest format to access information.

The leading primary source on institutions of the Five Dynasties, *Wudai huiyao* 五代會要 (WDHY), contains numerous errors, so I have used it cautiously and usually in consultation with other sources, when available. My book on the reign of Zhuangzong, published in China in 2009, provides important background information on Shatuo rule for the period preceding Mingzong's reign. The original text was replete with footnotes and bibliography, but my publisher deleted them to make the text more reader-friendly. Here, I apologize to scholars for the missing documentation.

The reader should be alerted to the fact that this is a list of works cited, not a comprehensive bibliography, as requested by my publisher.

List of Abbreviations

The following works are cited by abbreviation:

CFYG	<i>Cefu yuangui</i>
HR	<i>Historical Records of the Five Dynasties</i>
JTS	<i>Jiu Tang shu</i>
JWDS	<i>Jiu Wudai shi</i>

SGCQ *Shiguo chunqiu*
 WDHY *Wudai huiyao*
 WXTK *Wenxian tongkao*
 XTS *Xin Tang shu*
 XWDS *Xin Wudai shi*
 ZZTJ *Zizhi tongjian*

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